

Linguistic Human Rights and Linguistic Ecology: An Indian Perspective

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Abstract. India is a multilingual and multicultural country where the sociolinguistic situation is so diverse and complex. At the same time the societal and socio-economic situation has become complicated due to the foreign rules from the twelfth century till the mid of twentieth century. Though the plurilingualism is considered to be the basic foundation of India's socio-cultural solidarity uniquely prevalent from the very dawn of its civilization, the linguistic rights of each and every individual or each minority linguistic group or community is a big issue from the sociological, linguistic, academic and economic perspectives. This crucial issue has been becoming more and more prominent in the wake of globalization. Only some prominent languages have been brought within the ambit of the government language planning (LP) leaving a large number of languages and their dialects outside this. As a result, in course of time minority families decide to evolve their respective family language planning (FLP). Under these circumstances, we will deal with the idea linguistic human rights from the Indian perspective and try to see how the use of the (tribal) languages in education helps these communities as well as the nation revive, preserve and sustainably utilize the rich indigenous culture and knowledge system which can open up new vistas regarding the cultivation of Indian Knowledge System.

Keywords : Linguistic Human Rights; language planning; plurilingualism; culture; globalisation; linguistic ecology.

At the outset, I wish to state categorically that if linguistic human right (henceforth LHR) is denied to an individual or a linguistic community, all other kinds of human rights and allied issues relating human life and livelihood are automatically denied. This has emerged as a major crisis in multilingual countries like India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and others. The Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (UDLR), declared on June 6, 1996 at the World Conference on Linguistic Rights in Barcelona, Spain, promotes the idea that linguistic rights are both individual and collective, laying emphasis on the importance of protecting and promoting languages and linguistic communities. It recognizes the rights of all linguistic communities, irrespective of their status and location and its

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main objective is to ensure the equal treatment as well as the preservation of their own languages and cultures. UDLT categorically considers the following to be inalienable personal rights which may be exercised in any situation:

- the right to be recognized as a member of a language community;
- the right to the use of one's own language both in private and in public;
- the right to the use of one's own name;
- the right to interrelate and associate with other members of one's language community of origin;
- the right to maintain and develop one's own culture;
- and all the other rights related to language which are recognized in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 16 December 1966 and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of the same date (21).

Moreover, UDLR includes the following collective rights of language groups:

- the right for their own language and culture to be taught;
- the right of access to cultural services;
- the right to an equitable presence of their language and culture in the communications media;
- the right to receive attention in their own language from government bodies and in socioeconomic relations.

Again, the *Girona Manifesto* which was developed by International PEN's Translation and Linguistic Rights in May 2011 to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of the UDLR focuses on the following ten points:

1. Linguistic diversity is a world heritage that must be valued and protected.
2. Respect for all languages and cultures is fundamental to the process of constructing and maintaining dialogue and peace in the world.
3. All individuals learn to speak in the heart of a community that gives them life, language, culture and identity.
4. Different languages and different ways of speaking are not only means of communication; they are also the milieu in which humans grow and cultures are built.
5. Every linguistic community has the right for its language to be used as an official language in its territory.
6. School instruction must contribute to the prestige of the language spoken by the linguistic community of the territory.
7. It is desirable for citizens to have a general knowledge of various languages, because it favours empathy and intellectual openness, and contributes to a deeper knowledge of one's own tongue.
8. The translation of texts, especially the great works of various cultures, represents a very important element in the necessary process of greater understanding and respect among human beings.
9. The media is a privileged loudspeaker for making linguistic diversity work and for competently and rigorously increasing its prestige.
10. The right to use and protect one's own language must be recognized by the United Nations as one of the fundamental human rights.

In the backdrop of linguistic rights mentioned in UDLR, LHR has developed as a socio-political issue in the present global politics and language study. LHR basically relates to the use of language as an identity-proof officially imposed by the state machinery and a native speaker's right to use his or her mother tongue (henceforth MT) in all spheres of life. LHRs are the combination language rights and human rights (HRs). Educational LHRs which are related especially to the unconditional right to mother-tongue medium education are still mainly absent. The evident result of such denial has been and will also be the remaining of the minority language as minority one. Each and every linguistic community are entitled to have at its disposal all the resources necessary to ensure that its language is present at all levels of education within its territory: properly trained

competent teachers, appropriate teaching materials i.e., textbooks, traditional and innovative technology.

India's socio-linguistic situation is so diverse due to its multilingualism and multiculturalism and at the same time has become complicated due to the foreign rules from the twelfth century till the mid of twentieth century. Each state of India is multilingual in nature. Moreover, in each state there is generally a large number of people who speak the neighboring state's dominant language in addition to its own dominant language. Convergence of different linguistic groups in its socio-cultural soil has no doubt enriched and strengthened India's cultural heritage but has simultaneously imposed several genuine challenges on the way to LHR of mainly the speakers of minority and endangered languages and even of non-standard dialects of major or officially recognized languages. It is to be noted that LHR violation was prevalent in this country even during the pre-colonial and colonial periods, though the plurilingualism is considered to be the basic foundation of India's socio-cultural solidarity which, as mentioned above in the similar way, has been being uniquely carried out from the very dawn of India's civilization. This alarming situation has been becoming more and more prominent in the wake of globalization.

In India multidimensional complexities relating to language choice of people of a state or union territory belonging to more than one linguistic community have appeared to be a major concern to the political, administrative and legal bodies of the government machinery. It has been further complicated by the use of Arabic, English and some other foreign languages and the absence of consensus regarding the selection of national language or lingua franca in this vast country rich in geographical and cultural kaleidoscope. However, in the backdrop of such situation, if looked with deeper reflectivity, the attempt to ensure LHR of each and every citizen of this country has been becoming an enigma day by day mainly when the poor and illiterate or less educated people of linguistic minority comes to the door of education and justice, though National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 followed by *National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023* with a utopian ambition has emphasized on providing education through MT or if not possible through MT, then local majority/state language (this issue will be discussed later in the paper). Undoubtedly, it is the primary duty of the government to plan and execute comprehensively all the steps needed to ensure and

guarantee the LHR of each citizen of the country for the sake of the survival of all the cultures and languages and also the national integration in all respects.

The most crucial challenge for the maintenance of LHR in India lies in the fact that it has not been able to evolve an amicable consensus regarding number of languages spoken as mother tongues even after the elapse of more than 75 years after its independence from the colonial rule in 1947 as evidenced by the following statement of G. N. Devi in his book *India: A Linguistic Civilization*:

The list of 'Mother Tongue' reported by the 1961 census had 1,652 names. Beginning with the 1971 census, the government decided to in the list only the languages which had more than 10,000 speakers. The list of 1971 had a total of 108 names, with an additional entry (109)—of 'all others'. The policy of using a cut-off figure further eliminated the already marginalized and minor languages. They started increasingly invisible in social practice or political discourse. The relative lack of livelihood possibilities in the area where the minor or marginalized languages are spoken has led to an exodus to areas where major and mainstream languages are spoken. Thus, the language diversity that people have nurtured over millennia and which the Constitution has guaranteed is under attack due to the state's attitude to it...(86-87)

It is evident from the above quote that in case of language count within the ambit of census there is no concrete and consistent official yardstick in relation to the decision and calculation of the number of languages spoken in our country. See, the 1961 Census of India recorded a list of 1652 'mother tongues', while the figure in the census of 1971 was substantially reduced to only 108 and nearly 1500 'mother tongues' most of which are spoken by the nomadic and the indigenous tribal communities

were removed from the list. What this blatant fact upholds is totally contrary to what is stated in the Article 347 of the *Constitution of India*:

On a demand being made in that behalf the President may, if he is satisfied that a substantial proportion of the population of a State desire the use of any language spoken by them to be recognized throughout that State or any part thereof for such purpose as he may specify (19).

According to Khubchandani, “the linguistic and cultural plurality is the essence of the Indian societies marked by heterogeneity and as a result, Indian language-planning strategies always interrupt this kind of functional heterogeneity” (41). Educational linguistic human right which mainly emphasizes the children’s right to undergo mother tongue medium education is among the most important legitimate rights for any minority linguistic community for the maintenance of language and culture. In *From language Shift to Language revitalization and Sustainability: A Complexity Approach to Linguistic Ecology*, Albert Bastardas Boada opines:

Developments such as industrialization and urbanization, which have led to socio-economic and geographic mobility, have also played a fundamental role in the creation of conditions that encourage shift. With respect to the desire for socio-economic advancement, the contribution of modernization was to spread language changes up and down the social ladder when, before, they had taken root only in given, circumscribed strata at the top of subordinate societies. In many of these cases, the autochthonous aristocracy had already begun the process of language shift and abandoned the language of origin, both in formal and informal uses (135).

Government education policy adopted by the majority generally tends to promote the standard language of the state in all kinds of formal official

communication and education leaving the rest languages in informal unofficial ones. There are exceptions to this. NEP 2020, as mentioned above, has given importance mother tongue medium education at least at the primary level. Before we embark on this discussion on this issue, let us attempt to deal with the idea of linguistic ecology in order to make a comprehensive analysis of the topic of the present paper. In the article “The Ecology of Language”, Einar Haugen has clearly defined linguistic ecology, as quoted below:

Linguistic ecology may be defined as the study of interactions between any given language and its environment. The definition of environment might lead one’s thoughts first of all to the referential world to which language provides an index. However, this is the environment not of the language but of its lexicon and grammar. The true environment of a language is the society that uses it as one of its codes. Language exists only in the minds of its users, and it only functions in relating these users to one another and to nature, i.e. their social and natural environment. Part of its ecology is therefore psychological: its interaction with other languages in the minds of bi- and multilingual speakers. Another part of its ecology is sociological: its interaction with the society in which it functions as a medium of communication. The ecology of a language is determined primarily by the people who learn it, use it, and transmit it to others (57).

We can see that linguistic ecology and LHR are closely related so far as the struggle for saving the minority languages along with their native speakers is concerned. All kinds of activities in all spheres of life and livelihood involve language uses having naturally endowed with linguistic ecology. Though the native speakers of minority or endangered languages of a region or state are capable of carrying out their day-to-day activities with their own acquired linguistic repertoire or resources,

in most of the cases political authority imposes state language of language of the majority on those minority indigenous communities without having reflective thought on the sociolinguistic and socio-political impact. They have to speak in that language as they are ordered by the ruling power. State claims for a prestigious language which should be standardized and orders its people to use the standard language.

The standard language promoted by the government language planning (LP) becomes the only language for office, administration, education, literature, media and rest languages turn to be the languages of informal, unofficial and inner terrace. As a result, in course of time minority families decide to evolve their respective family language planning (FLP) and accordingly the indigenous minority families' bottom level decisions regarding the use of languages at home and outside and children's education medium language. This is supported by Noman Tahir and M. J. Warsi (2021) in the article "A Study on Language Shift: the Case of Kakrala Urdu" which categorically shows that in Kakrala, a city in Badaun district of Uttar Pradesh, "the linguistic journey of the educated generation is changing from their mother tongue (Kakrala Urdu) to lingua-franca, Urdu-Hind, which indeed is posing a great threat to the regional variety of Urdu" (131). Similarly, Bhim Lal Gautam (2023) in his article "Multilingualism and Language Shift in Tamang: Trends and Impacts" argues that multilingualism coupled with globalization exercises a heavy impact on language shift among the speakers of minority language Tamang in Nepal. Gautam claims:

Multilingualism and the language contact situation of Tamang speaking community have been influenced by factors like migration, globalization, tourism, media and economical activities like jobs and employments business and marketing, entrepreneurship, etc. (96)

Like Tamang, almost all the minority languages in India and most of the countries have more or less the same fate and so are "predominantly confined to domestic or local communication for religious and cultural activities" (105). In spite of being aware of the importance of MT, the speakers of such language tend to use, rather are forced to use the languages of the majority community or state language(s) in the academic, economic and official communications and even all sorts of

informal communications outside home. This situation of language shift due to globalization, socio-political apathy and other factors leads such minority languages towards the state of being vulnerable to death, if not immediate death causing the death of a civilization embodying culture, value, norms and related knowledge systems. It is evident that “state-imposed top-down language policies are designed to address and regulate social structures at all levels” (Ghosh 46) and the language choice at the micro-level i.e., family level emerges “as a crucial factor in the fate of a languages and cultures of the minority communities leading to *cultural anorexia*”. (Phillipson 33). As recorded in Wikipedia website (accessed on 27.05.2025), 192 languages of India are classified as vulnerable or endangered, However, there are innumerable minority languages, mainly the languages of the small indigenous tribal communities, are facing similar crisis.

In spite of being vernacular and mother tongue, these languages are gradually pushed to only in narrow space of use due to the societal pressure and exploitation by the dominant/majority languages and slowly the languages are led to position of extinction. Hence if found that a language is (critically) endangered, immediate steps for the preservation of the language i.e., proper language planning in terms of revitalization, language and folk literature documentation, encouragement of the native speakers to use it at home and locality, etc., need to be undertaken by the concerned government and NGOs working in linguistic rights. For instance, Indian Government has awarded Padma Shri (2024) to Mr. Dhaniram Toto for developing the script of Toto, endangered language, spoken by around 1400 Totos living in Alipurduar district of West Bengal. Such attempts along with the linguistic awareness among the native speakers can create us an opportunity to preserve the concerned languages, if it is not possible for us to save those from being extinct or dead.

It is needed for the linguistic sustainability and ecology which is preconditioned by the state’s positive approach to all the languages and the mutual respect and understanding in language use among the neighbouring linguistic communities. In this respect Singapore is a glaring example of both the linguistic ecology and socio-economic prosperity which have taken simultaneously due to the predominance of political will and consensus in this tiny but ethnically and linguistically hyper-diverse country after its independence in 1965. It, Ritu Jain (2024) argues, “has achieved the prosperity in academically and commercially due to

government's dynamic role in socio-academic fields giving importance in the use of mother tongue and English in school education for almost all the linguistically ethnic groups of people or citizens of Singapore" (53). Thus, Singapore is a glaring instance of how the language policy has amicably been developed by accommodating contention-and-consensus among the ethnic communities for the well being of the nation and thereby has given space linguistic ecology.

Again, in this connection one crucial point is that adaptive language evolution is a natural and inevitable phenomenon as observed in the history of language across the world. This evolution process involves simultaneously the language maintenance and shift taking place slowly and gradually over time and subsequently resulting in the emergence new languages. See, though languages like Latin, Ancient Greek and Sanskrit which are generally referred to as 'dead languages' (not commonly used in sociolinguistics) evolved by the continuous transmission from one generation to the next and expanded into different regional dialects and those dialects gradually gained the status of the standardized speech forms or languages.

For example, Latin still lives in modern Italian, French, Portuguese, Spanish and Romanian. Similarly Sanskrit lives in modern Indo-Aryan languages like Bangla, Hindi, Odia, Assamese, Marathi, Punjabi, Gujrati, Marathi, Dogri, etc. It is the very live fact of language evolution.

Now India being a plurilingual country, as mentioned above accommodates the languages of at least five language families such as Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Semitic, Austro-Asiatic and Sino-Tibetan. In addition to the major linguistic communities, India is inhabited by innumerable major and minor tribal communities who have and use their own languages.

India has the following major tribal populations whose data relating to their number and percentage are available from Census 2011. But shockingly enough, a huge number of minority tribal communities are mostly left out of such documentation,

Major Tribal population and location as per Census 2011 (quoted from Pushplata's 2019 article "The Influence of Globalization over Tribal Culture, Education and Health in Jharkhand")

Name of the Tribes	Population in Million	Population in percentage	Geographical Locations
Gond	7.5	14.5%	Karnataka, Andhra, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra
Bhill	7.4	14.3%	Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh
Santali	4.3	8.3%	Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa, Assam, Tripura
Mina	2.1	4.0%	Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh
Oraon	1.9	3.7%	Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Orissa, Maharashtra, Tripura
Munda	1.5	2.8%	Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa, Tripura, Madhya Pradesh

In India's deeply-layered and complex linguistic landscape, a language functions not only just as a means of communication but also as a badge of identity. Due to the prevalent socio-political, socio-academic and socio-economic crises, a huge chunk of population of India is gripped by severely facing huge poverty, hunger, illiteracy, unemployment and *cultural anorexia* even in the 21st century. What India needs today is the political consensus and will power to build up a comprehensive planning and its constructive execution for the well being of all Indians irrespective their castes, creeds and religious beliefs. And the basic and fundamental steps for this are on the part of the central and state governments the sincere attempts to eradicate poverty and introduce a well-planned education system mainly for the deprived and minority linguistic groups and thereby implement the principle of universalization of education, as declared in Right to Education Act 2009, NEP 2020 and NCF 2023 (For detail see Pattanayak 1981, Dasgupta 2000, 2001, 2002 & 2008 and Singh 1992). NCF 2023 has given a detailed roadmap regarding the primary education through mother tongue even for the minority linguistic communities. For this purpose three-language policy which means the teaching of mother tongue or local language, English and Hindi or Major Indian Language (MIL) has been projected at least in the primary education. But for the effective implementation of this policy a great amount of both the physical and human resources is needed in this vast country and to arrange this, a befitting amount of money need to be allocated by the governments concerned. Secondly, hundreds of properly trained teachers are needed for the purpose and the required facility for

teacher training is to be made available across the country. Thirdly, preparation of bi-/tri-lingual dictionaries, glossaries of technical terms, etc. are no doubt needed for the modernization of a language. Translation of a number of knowledge-based texts in many subjects can be of great help. This effort will positively create knowledge discourses in the concerned language and will make a significant contribution to the eventual emergence of specialized, technical literature in that language. Knowledge creation and dissemination in the regional and minor languages for the general readers as well as the professionals must be recognized and encouraged today as a much-needed activity. Fourthly, mutual respect towards each other's language and culture will increase and thereby a peaceful harmonious societal relations within and among the communities will naturally grow. It is very need of the day for the national interest in relation to the linguistic ecology, socio-ecology and socio-culture of the country India which from the time immemorial believes in 'unity in diversity' allowing the peaceful co-existence of diverse and conflicting ideas. Finally, a very important aspect of this venture is that the use of the tribal languages in education will definitely help these communities as well as the nation revive, preserve and sustainably utilize the rich indigenous culture and knowledge system which can open up new vistas regarding the cultivation of Indian Knowledge System.

To conclude, though the critics of the policy contend that although it sounds fine in theory, in practice it has not been followed throughout the country, some positive impacts of this can be expected so far as honour of LHRs, revitalization of linguistic ecology, revival of core indigenous repertoire of knowledge and culture of these minority tribes are concerned.

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