

Indigenous Language Revitalization: The Context of Inpui Naga in Northeast India

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Abstract

In the past few decades, there had been an increasing trend of indigenous language revitalization around the world. But the dilemma of weighing the pros and cons in the process of revitalization invites critical engagement. This article presents some of the issues of language revitalization and also placed it in the context of the Inpui speakers of the Nagas from northeast India. The article conveyed that in spite of various challenges that confronted it, indigenous language revitalization and bilingual form of communication needed to be arranged through civil societies, state or international mechanisms.

Keywords: language shift, revitalization, bilingual,

Résumé

Sedamnu sangwan somni somthum lakpiya, baram baram ruan chong piringhoulatlang karam rakan kanu muwe. Dida heiba chuanna kakhanchuilang bathang amme. Hei om chuihiak heina Inpui tinu Naga ruan India om nisaksuakpekla lungnu ruan lambi thunknu balang kasem hiakthang nuwe. Heiba chuihiak na rinnuba, chong piringkalatnu heiya kungtaknu inja kadou peida, ani chonga, ruan lianhounu chongle bachu bachamlang, makebe kabia lang, meebing, sasaan khatle taleipuba ruanle kunga kut kaikarunga chuan tolang bathang amme diga rinnu we.

1. Introduction

1.1 Views on Indigenous language Revitalisation

The issue of indigenous language revitalisation had been a meeting point for scholarship and activism. Post world war II, it had occupied a crucial place among the indigenous people. The question of indigenous language literacy and documentation faced various contestations. Russell Means, the American Indian writer leader sets it clear in his speech about the tribal's uncomfotability with writing,

“The only possible opening for a statement of this kind is that I detest writing. The process itself epitomizes the European concept of “legitimate” thinking; what is written has an importance that is denied the spoken. My culture, the Lakota culture, has an oral tradition, so I ordinarily reject writing. (Padel, 1996)

The discussion also revolved around “autonomous” versus the “ideological” models of literacy. (Street 1984) While the “autonomous” model considered indigenous language literacy to be “neutral” technologies that can be easily detached, the “ideological” model “concentrates on the social practice of reading and writing”¹. According to Brian Bielenberg, “literary discussions in the context of language revitalization should be looked at from an ideological model of literacy” (1999). Various texts showed the struggle and the challenges involved in the attempt and the process of revitalization of the indigenous language. In the context of the Navajo speakers, many felt that documentation could lead institutions to become more

indigenous. But others argued that English literacy is the way to “get ahead” and indigenous language education could become an obstacle in the way of their children's future. (McCaulin, 1992; Bielenberg, 1999) But even after its indigenous language incorporation, the use of Navajo was limited to the schools and church which were the two powerful institutions that teaches and communicates the language in a way different from the traditional Navajo.

These challenges mentioned above showed the complexities that confronted the task of indigenous language revitalization. Bielenberg aptly reminded the stakeholders to be aware of the cultural repercussions that come with such task of revitalization. On the other hand, McLaughlin strongly voiced about empowerment through literacy. He also suggested three points to be reminded in undertaking such task, two of which advocated for long term commitment to hiring local individuals for teaching and an undoing of the status quo and prestige hierarchy of oral and written English (McLaughlin, 1995). Nancy Hornberger assured the beneficial use of a bilingual education stating that the use of indigenous language alongside dominant language results to dialogism, meaning-making and access to wider discourses (2006). According to Teresa McCarty revitalizing indigenous language is a means of resistance in the face of homogenizing and standardizing force of globalization. (2003)

2. The Constitution of Life Through Language

Language is the means through which the indigenous people expressed themselves and chart out their way of life. In the context of the Nagas of Northeast India, the folktales surrounding Hornbill were a very significant way of shaping the tribal society towards kindness, and rooting a sense of justice in them. The folklores, and cultural 190events and traditions contain paradigms of social living.

¹ Bielenberg, 1999

But the process of revitalization had been scarce and inadequate or even worse at least among the Inpui.

3. Situation of the local language in formal Institutions

I attended a school where English was compulsory not only as the medium of teaching, but also communication among students and teachers. Local dialects were forbidden and repressed. The ability to communicate in English became a symbol of class and a form of status quo. A binary lens exposed the repression of indigenous dialects on one hand, and the popularization of the mainstream English language on the other. It is often propagated through a well-placed system, institutionalized and that eventually became a social norm.

4. Position of Inpui language and challenges

I belong to a tribe called Inpui from the state of Manipur in India. Inpui falls under the “unsafe” under the Intergenerational Language transmission and more so as it is a small speech community. It is also an undocumented language. (Based on the document submitted to the International Expert Meeting on UNESCO Programme Safeguarding of Endangered Languages Paris 10-12 March 2003)² With just around twelve thousand native speakers, the tribe is a minority among the Nagas, and they rapidly face threats not only from the institutionalized languages, but also from the majority tribes in close proximity to them. It has been told that many of the Inpui villages were assimilated into other larger tribes (Khumba 2012). And in the present, the rapid change in their cultural norms, social practices and ubiquity of the western culture and its dominant English language through the internet spaces, social space and institutionalized spaces had radical impact on the indigenous language and its articulation. With it also came the loss of their culture, folktales, social practices and meetings that were once spaces within which a language is learned and articulated.

In other words, with the loss of the indigenous spaces invaded by the new western cultural and language norms also brings the phenomenon of “language shift” or the loss of the indigenous language. The relationship between indigenous language and English has always been biased. In a post-colonial context, the odds are always against the indigenous languages. Without a systematic effort to protect them, the people to whom they are important could be stripped of all their indigeneity.

The present education system hasn’t been inclusive with the indigenous people nor about their knowledge systems. They are often kept out of the ambit of the present forms of what constitutes knowledge. When indigenous knowledge and practices are considered as inferior or unworthy of being considered knowledge, where should the countervailing mechanism rest? It begins with documenting and coding their language and their knowledge. State and International institutions need to make space for these languages and its culture that are under threat by institutionalizing a system that is

inclusive. More indigenous youths need to be allowed to participate in the preservation of their language and culture.

4.1 Recent Tasks in preservation

One of the first and most important contributions in codification of the Inpui language in Northeast India is the Bible Society of India’s translation of the Bible into Inpui. And subsequently, the first Inpui dictionary was compiled by Inpui Students in New Delhi. These two accomplishments still remain like disparate monuments. Although in the recent, there had been an effort to publish a yearly magazine organized by the Inpui Students Union Delhi, its reach missed out a larger chunk of the population. The process of preservation needed institutionalization and incorporation of the indigenous language into the daily practices of the people- in their formal or informal, public and private spaces of interaction and communication.

5. Language Context and Role of Technology

Words and Language are context specific. A language loses its prominence when it loses its social and cultural context or is subdued by another new cultural and social change. The non-western ways of communication also face struggle due to the competition it faces from the ubiquity of modern technological social spaces and internet dominated by English, and uprooting of its language from its contextual specificity. But according to Mark Waschauer, internet is neither neutral nor deterministic, but rather a site of social struggle (Waschauer 1998). Yet definitely, the stakes are against the indigenous language especially in a post-colonial context like the Northeast India. But technology and internet can be shaped and made to be more accessible and friendlier to indigenous language through the bilingual mode of communication. The Hawaiian Leoki that provides a complex platform or services for indigenous speakers to engage electronically in their native language is a front runner in this revitalization endeavor (Warschauer et al., 1997) Among the indigenous tribe of Inpui or the larger Nagas, bilingual use in education is quite dismal. And even in spaces where formal education cannot reach, the internet space with its ubiquitous presence is an immensely important space for promotion of indigenous language.

6. Bilingual mode in Development

The importance of institutionalizing the bilingual use of communication is also deeply important in development. A lot of the government schemes are introduced in the dominant language of Hindi which is unintelligible to the indigenous communities. Hence the scheme remains secretive and inaccessible, as it is incomprehensible to the public. The bilingual nomenclature for these schemes can create ownership among the indigenous people and press the officials towards accountability towards the schemes. Thus, development is closely inter-woven with the use of the indigenous language.

²Brenzinger, et al. 2003

7. Conclusion

And thus, the bilingual opportunities for the indigenous people must be set in motion. The concerted efforts of the indigenous people with the experts, technocrats, policy makers and international organizations are of dire importance for the betterment of the indigenous peoples and the preservation of diversity in the world.

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