

OPINION

India is one of the great repositories of languages — we need a notion of heritage to save them

One of the tragedies of modern culture is that while all societies mourn the dead, few have mourning rituals for the death of a species, or the disappearance of a language. Modernity needs a mourning wall to bemoan the death of a language or the missingness of a seed. In fact, the collective death of cultures as genocide, extermination and extinction have few rituals of memory, few moments of commemoration.

Death of a culture

The death of a language in particular has a particular poignancy. When a language dies, a way of life dies, a way of thinking disappears, a connection between word and world is lost. Often, today, we mourn the death of the last speaker, treating him as a vestige of an entire past. Newspapers often report the death of a last tribal speaker, scarcely mentioning the death of a culture that preceded it. There is a hypocrisy and ambivalence which captures modernity's attitude to the obsolescent and near extinct.

There is a failure of story-telling where the death of a language becomes a litany of numbers. Yet there is fatalism behind numbers. Futurists warn that over 3,000 languages might disappear over the next ten years. The danger to minority languages and oral languages is high. Almost any census on languages is a ritual of mourning.

Development and the institutions of development like school mutually guarantee the disappearance of minority languages and dialects. A school generally teaches in a majority language. The pitiless critique of such schools was made by the Kannada writer U.R. Ananthamurthy, who said India is a country where the illiterate worker speaks five-seven languages and the convent schoolchild speaks one.

One group that is steadfastly fighting to keep languages alive is the People's Linguistic Survey of India (PSLI). The chairman of the PSLI, Ganesh N. Devy, a literary critic who spent years saving tribal languages, remarked that clerical definitions can be genocidal and facilitate extinction. Mr. Devy said that when the Government of India decided to define a language as a form of life marked by a script, it triggered the erasure of oral languages. India in many ways is an oral society that understands the culture of orality. Today one needs to create a new social contract between orality, textuality and digitality to keep pluralism alive.

Mr. Devy added that the silence of the tribe began in the moment of this legislation. The PSLI also noted that extinction of a language and the death of an ecology often go together. In India coastal languages are dying as the coast and the livelihoods of the coast are being destroyed ecologically and culturally. The intrusions of the corporate world are forcing fishing communities inward and in the process they give up their languages. Sometimes as an anthropologist I often think of the hypocrisy called corporate social responsibility (CSR) and wish 5% of CSR were devoted to saving languages and crafts. Sadly, corporations lack such an imagination. No corporation thinks of language loss as a loss of human capital. What we need now are chartered accountants of culture.

Losing a world

Losing a language is losing a cosmology, a set of myths, rituals of competence. Yet no cost-benefit ever calculates the cultural cost of language extinction. It is seen as obsolescence, a literal consequence of modernity and development. The sadness in India is that it is one of the great repositories of language in the world. We need a notion of heritage which can save agricultural and linguistic diversity together. A nation which has 140,000 varieties of rice and over 780 languages is a trustee of diversity. We need to invent a citizenship and a commons of cultures as part of our democratic imagination. A democracy that fails to be inventive about culture eventually becomes a nominal, rudimentary and standardised world. A people need to feel a language is relevant, possesses dignity, provides competence, identity and meaning for it to survive.

The guarantee for such a world is rarely available. A language disappears as a new generation enters modernity, abandoning memory and older forms of competence.

One needs a special prayer for a language going extinct. It is restricted to a few elder speakers and as one confronts the last speaker, science objectivises her into a museum exhibit. The death of the last speaker and the breast-beating that follows are among the farcical exercises of a modern culture that museumises these forms of life and lets them go extinct.

When the art critic, Ananda Kentish Muthu Coomaraswamy, claimed that the museum smelled of death and formaldehyde, he could have been thinking about the way society looks at an extinct language. It collects information tapes of a dying language, freezes its grammar but lets a community die. The indifference of modernity and its idolatry of progress is best caught in the ritual of language loss. I remember Albert Camus once said, "statistics do not bleed" — but as one discovers that a language becomes extinct once every 14 days, even numbers seem to be in mourning.

One senses this as one looks at the UNESCO atlas of world languages in danger. One reads that 230 languages have become extinct since 1950. Yet what one discovers is that one is creating abstract information without the innovations of a community. What one needs is a celebration of multilingualism. The myth of the speaker holding forth in one language is a poor myth of a Macaulayite world. One needs a kaleidoscope of spaces where different languages are juxtaposed and one switches between them as one shifts context. Translation too becomes an important act of citizenship. Even here the bias towards monolingualism is clear. Ananthamurthy once suggested that the Third World needs a new model of UNESCO for translations. Translation today is a one-way process. Local and regional languages are translated into English but one rarely thinks of translating from Tamil to Spanish. One needs to move to a more polyglot world to sustain a vision of diversity.

In fact, language loss is a part of a bigger problematic of diversity.

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