

Federalism and Linguistic Diversity: Preserving Endangered Languages in Nepal

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Abstract: The paper argues that indigenous languages of Nepal are in danger of replacement by Nepali language, the language of greater economic power, education, and social prestige, leading to its possible death. Analyzing the root causes of the decline and death of indigenous languages from the socio-political perspective, some suggestions have been made in order to reduce the further loss of linguistic diversity. Both to promote Nepal's cultural and linguistic diversity and improve education for children from indigenous language communities, the Nepal government has proposed the implementation of multilingual education program as part of the "Education for All" program. Based on Fishman's model for language revitalization, an analysis of the possibility of the survival of indigenous languages, and a critique of the multilingual education program with respect to the role they may play in promoting the revitalization of indigenous languages have been made as suggestions. It is concluded that current multilingual education program will assist in revitalizing the indigenous languages if they obtain grassroots support from its speech communities. Finally, it is recommended that federal states need to adopt inclusive language policies for preserving Nepal's increasingly endangered linguistic diversity.

Keywords: Linguistic diversity, language death, language revitalization, socio-political approach

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

Linguists and historians have estimated that more than 10,000 languages once existed in human history. There is no official data that how many languages have disappeared in the past few centuries, but the foremost linguist Crystal (2000) has believed that so far as many as 4,000 languages are feared dead in the world (p. 3). More languages are still disappearing continuously, in many cases resulting in death. Only some, such as Latin and Sanskrit, have been kept alive for ceremonial use only. Contrarily, many have disappeared without being known to us with partial information. Many others have disappeared without our knowing anything of or about them; only their names are known from historical records.

If this trend of disappearance of languages continues, thousands more will be dead in the future. So language death is a problem that affects all language families, from the most powerful such as Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan to the weaker ones such as Australian, North American Indian, or Tibeto-Burman. In this way, dominant languages like English, Chinese and Spanish will kill smaller languages all around the globe. When a language dies, so does a piece of history it nurtures. In particular, those languages that lack writing systems or sufficient historical records will have a tragic end.

In this way, linguistic diversity is being threatened around the world, and this threat is, in particular, severely felt by indigenous peoples. In Nepal, many indigenous mother tongues, particularly those belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family, are both poorly documented and in danger of disappearing. Descriptive linguists categorize languages according to levels such as safe, at risk, endangered and extinct (Crystal, 2000, p. 20), and most of Nepal's indigenous mother tongues are believed to be endangered. The key measure of a language's capability is considered not so much the number of people who speak it as the extent to which children are learning it as their native tongues.

II. NEPAL'S LINGUISTIC SITUATION

Though Nepal is home to more than 123 languages, as many as 60 indigenous languages are on the endangered list. The extinction of such languages has been on the rise for past few decades. It is estimated that Nepal has already lost around 13 indigenous languages so far and many others such as Kusunda, Raute and Lhomi are now on the verge of extinction. It will observe more death tolls of languages if urgent measures are not adopted to preserve them.

The main threat to indigenous languages is the conscious and unconscious desires of parents not passing on their language to their children (Pun, 2014, p. 108). In some places, indigenous people who speak the Nepali language fluently are looked upon more favorably than those who use indigenous languages skillfully. In the similar way, the Nepali language is used as the medium of instruction in schools and universities, minimizing the use of indigenous languages. One of the reasons is that native children get little or no incentive to learn their languages. Their parents and community around fail to make them understand the value of the language and the consequences of its decline and death.

Language death is, therefore, one of the major issues to indigenous language communities in Nepal. It can occur at two levels. First, it happens when a person or a family migrates from one place to another. Secondly, when the whole community stops using the language, it may be lost forever (Pun, 2014, p. 108). The second one has become a common threat to all types of indigenous communities in Nepal. In addition, it is due to the fact that many such languages are not spoken anywhere else in the world.

If seen from socio-political perspective, the nation-state is the only institutionalized entity that can forcibly change the whole process of language socialization in a country where more than one language exists. In many such countries, dominant languages can be employed to drive out the smaller ones that can be considered as promoting linguistic discrimination. In the past, in Nepal, the nation-state used a simple method to punish or remove indigenous and minority populations as was done by the Khas Kingdom in the 12th century and then by the Gorkha Kingdom in the 18th century (Pun, 2014, p. 102). In the recent past, during the Panchayat era, the Nepali language was considered the single most preferable language for Nepal. More recently, this happens through indirect means, the easy way of doing that has been the compulsory imposition by the nation-state on matters related to the use of a language for official and educational purposes.

Even after the restoration of democracy in Nepal in 1990, the Nepali language is considered the official language, which is the *de facto* national language. The use of Nepali language is reinforced through the nation-state and media, private businesses and educational institutions. Moreover, social, economic and political forces converge to make the Nepali language a valuable commodity, often to the exclusion of other languages. Indeed, in the realm of education, Nepal has a history of suppressing the active use of non-Nepali languages. In this case also, the subsequent governments in the past have tried to promote more assimilation of the speakers, causing the language death of many other communities.

III. INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE POLICY - THE FIRST STEP

All human beings should try their best to preserve the languages of all kinds. Like biodiversity, the world's languages must be safeguarded at all times; it should not be taken for granted. Every time when a language dies, a piece of our human history dies along with it. As Wamalwa (2013) states, "The loss of any language is therefore a loss of humanity" (p. 258). Not only this, when a language disappears, the knowledge and thought that has been stored in the language through generations of use, disappears with it. With the growth of powerful and widespread world languages, such as English, Chinese and Spanish, it is necessary to take special steps to protect linguistic diversity, in order to ensure the survival of smaller indigenous languages. Within a country, for example in Nepal, almost all the national languages belong to "the language group of marginalized and disadvantaged indigenous people" (Santwona Memorial Academy, 2012, p. 18), which are at the verge of dying. This poses a serious challenge to such people, especially to children whose mother tongue is different from the one used as the medium of instruction in schools.

In Nepal, recent developments in education have resulted in the establishment of multilingual education program as part of the "Education for All" slogan with an objective of maintaining and reviving indigenous languages (Phyak, 2011, p. 30). Multilingual education program is conducted in developing countries where the speakers of minority language tend to be disadvantaged in mainstream education. The mother tongue as the medium of instruction of the schools is an equitable and accessible approaches of education to the children with different linguistic background because a person "develops not only his/her interpersonal relationship using his/her mother tongue but also shapes his/her cognitive development" (Phyak, 2007, p. 1). Realizing this fact, the desired goals of the multilingual education program promoted by the Nepal government are to aid students in attaining similar levels of competency in the indigenous language and the official Nepali language. The main focus of the program is to facilitate the reinfusion of the indigenous language in all social communication spheres, and to establish regional-ethnic, national-international cultural content for speakers of the indigenous language. In addition, the Nepal government suggests that local communities and teachers should take the initiative to protect and develop their indigenous languages. The stated community recommendations from the multilingual education program hold that teachers should take the responsibility to create indigenous language texts in any way possible, i.e. writing down oral stories. The teachers should also advocate the use of the indigenous language in the community. Similarly, the general community should post signs in the indigenous language, and push for TV, radio, and general broadcasts in the indigenous language.

It is clear from the statement of these goals that the developers of multilingual education program and the local communities should work together to achieve the desired goals and recognize the necessity of a grassroots approach to language revitalization. The teachers should be given responsibility of preparing the curriculum according to the local need, a sound pedagogical method and students' interest so that they can be able to make social changes with respect to the maintenance and revival of indigenous languages. A study done on Limbu language by Phyak (2007) indicates that the teachers were found worried about the future of students. They said that mother tongue education were not for solving language problems of indigenous children in school but for the preservation of language (p. 30). Thus, the ultimate rationale behind multilingual education program should be for the promotion of mother tongue education that empowers the underprivileged groups. In addition, the use of oral histories compiled by local teachers as school and curricular resources has been recommended as a way of broadening the scope of instruction to include a critical perspective on the conditions of life in the community.

If the indigenous languages are to survive, their speakers must become critical of the relegation of their language to an inferior status. These objectives could be achieved at the same time as the language of the text is studied and used as a valuable linguistic resource. The inclusion of these features in a developmental multilingual education would provide a powerful opportunity for critical teaching, supporting the development and maintenance of indigenous languages among school children who should be encouraged to feel pride in their heritage and who will ensure that mother tongues are not lost. In order to implement the multilingual education successfully, necessary steps should be taken for establishing schools which use mother tongue as a language of instruction, choosing "bi- and multilingualism as a minimal requirement to teach children in the beginning grades of basic education for the creation of this strong foundation to take place" (Kadel, 2017, p. 190). The obvious places to do so would be in communities where mother tongue is still in use, and where children could be encouraged to maintain and develop their language as their native language.

In order to revive and retain the native language in a community, there must be some members who are willing and able to engage in the struggle that will "enable children to effectively learn additional languages" (Kadel, 2017, p. 197). A first step in that direction might be the establishment and effective implementation of mother tongue-based bi/multilingual education programs, but in order to achieve that objective, several conceptual and attitudinal changes must occur first. For instance, first, individual speakers in the community must be persuaded to appreciate the value of their linguistic and cultural heritage, encouraging them to pass it on to their children. Secondly, the community must be convinced to use indigenous languages for public interactions. Thirdly, the mainstream community must be convinced about the value and beauty of ancient languages such as the languages of indigenous peoples.

IV. FEDERATING EDUCATION: THE NEXT STEP

Indigenous languages are obviously dominated by the Nepali language, which is more powerful than others. The multilingual education designed and implemented by the Nepal government will certainly promote the cultural and linguistic diversity of the country and improve education for indigenous children. But it constitutes only a first step in the struggle to revitalize a dying language. As Fishman's model (1999) indicates, a grassroots interest in preserving the language will also be necessary if the Nepali language is to survive. A question arises: why should we care about dying languages? A single answer to this question is, Crystal (2000) has postulated, because we need diversity, because languages express identity, because languages are repositories of history, because languages contribute to the sum of human knowledge, because languages are interesting in themselves (pp. 27-67). It means that language death must be viewed as a terrible loss, and language renewal is thus beneficial and worth trying.

Indeed, the problems inherent in addressing the death and decline of the indigenous languages is a thorny issue in which many changes must be made on several levels, but it happens to be inappropriate due to "wrong and ineffective project design and implementation strategies" (Phyak, 2011, p. 43). If indigenous communities want to revive and retain their mother tongue, they must work hard. The only solution would to establish multilingual education program. Similarly, individual speakers must be taught to understand the value of their cultural and linguistic heritage and be ready to transfer to the next generation. In order to do that, Henze & Davis (1999) suggest that "the decision to maintain or renew a threatened language must be made by the speakers of that language, not by outsiders such as linguists or anthropologists, no matter how well intentioned" (p. 5). So the indigenous communities must be taught to use their mother tongue for public interactions.

In doing so, it is hoped that the dangers of pushing a migrant language and culture in which ancient indigenous peoples remain disconnected from their descendants and the glories of the past. In addition, it is crucial that the government should support the use of indigenous languages in many areas, especially that of education. With current trends in Nepal, the educational use of indigenous languages appears to be a possibility; however, there are many factors that prevent a thorough-going implementation of the multilingual education program.

The first obstacle to multilingual education is the lack of qualified multilingual teachers. For a study done by Santwona Memorial Academy in Nepal (2012) shows that although the teachers were found trained, "they had only a little knowledge of teaching MLE [multilingual education] system" (p. 74). So it is necessary to provide teacher trainings for preparing textbooks and other materials and teaching methods in a mother tongue. The second obstacle is the complete lack of resources or funding available to teachers. For example, if someone is hired to teach far off in the remote areas, he or she will go with no money, no books or any other materials, not even paper or pencils, and no prospect of receiving any pay for his teaching for months on the job. The third obstacle is the lack of enthusiasm on the part of parents, who are already unwilling in many cases to send their children to school. Parents are more willing to send children to school when the learning of Nepali and English is emphasized; there is virtually no value placed on acquiring literacy in indigenous languages.

Apart from these obstacles, the first approach to solving the problem of gaining more speakers would be the establishment of multilingual education program, which would likely be seen not as benefit to the community, but as an imposition from the outsiders. In addition, a massive campaign would be necessary to convince them to make them participate in the program, and to make them informed about the program despite the lack of mass media in these marginalized communities.

The second approach to solving the problem of gaining more speakers would be more practical than the first one, which would be to introduce two-way engagement program, where native and non-native speakers could be taught in the indigenous languages. This sort of program could be introduced in the cities, where new migrants of indigenous language speakers would provide sufficient native speakers who would otherwise soon lose their ability to speak the language. Migration to the cities, especially from remote parts of Nepal, is a common trend now. But social contempt of indigenous languages as considered an inferior language prevents most Nepali-speaking people from considering this sort of language experience for their children. In such a situation, parents should realize that "the MT-MLE as a medium to enhance the capacity of their children to learn second and foreign language" (Santwona Memorial Academy, 2012, p. 74). Unfortunately, the good intentions on the part of the Nepal government are not likely to lead to any real implementation of multilingual education program, given the complexity of these issues. Yet, in the absence of any such educational programs, the survival of linguistic diversity is unlikely, and the continued decline in what remains of indigenous culture points to the continued oppression of the indigenous descendants, leading to their eventual assimilation.

Nepal is striving for federalism as its system of government. As opposed to the pre-1990 unitary government of Nepal where powers were essentially allocated in three branches – the executive, legislative and judiciary, a federal state is characterized by vertical power sharing among multiple layers of government that can call for "the formulation of an inclusive language policy through which speakers of different language communities can have an equal access to the national system" (Yadava, 2007, p. 13). It allows for the allocation of powers and responsibilities for local governments to act on issues close to home. According to the Consociational theory, the adoption of decentralized forms of governance, notably federal constitutions, facilitates social stability and democratic consolidation in multicultural and multilingual societies; but proponents argue that decentralization has many potential advantages for bringing decisions closer to the community, for policy flexibility, innovation, and experimentation, and for ensuring government responsiveness to local needs (Norris, 2008, pp. 25-31). In Nepal, for example, a federal government can easily manage the issues related to indigenous languages. The national government can address issues that are national in scope, but it makes a lot of sense for local governments, who have deeper insights of what their constituents need, to attend to them. Surely, this will be faster and better targeted in Nepal's context when there are the issues of disadvantaged speech communities.

V. CONCLUSION

In a modern society like Nepal, fewer and fewer children are learning indigenous languages in the traditional way from their parents and elders. Those parents who speak their mother tongue do not show their interest to pass it on to their children. So in many cases, indigenous languages are used by the parental generation only.

Many linguists believe that each language should be considered the heritage of its speakers that reflects its culture even after it dies. But with the death and decline of such a language, an irreplaceable part of human life is lost forever. Additionally, preventing the indigenous languages is a matter of great urgency. It is also crucial to ensuring the protection of the cultural identity and dignity of indigenous peoples and safeguarding their traditional heritage. In this way, maintaining linguistic diversity for future generations is essentially important.

In conclusion, the most widely spoken indigenous languages in Nepal have been gradually declining in use since the Nepal unification by Prithvi Narayan Shah in the 18th century. The Nepal government has designed a new multilingual education program aimed at developing first and second language literacy in both indigenous languages and Nepali (the same applies to English language since it is an international language) for

the marginalized communities. Even though the program is well designed and will have some positive effect, it is not sufficient to turn the tide of language shift for indigenous language communities. In addition, the program appears to suffer from serious problems of implementation, and lacks the sort of grassroots support in most cases have to be successful. In order to obtain grassroots support, the negative perception of indigenous languages, linked to historical disadvantage and oppression, must be attacked at every level, particularly in the majority community. Without such an increased, positive social and educational support, it is unlikely that the linguistic diversity will survive.

Lastly, language as a vehicle of knowledge and cultural expression should be given top consideration, as it is the first block in a linear relationship with education, economic and political development. More than yet another shift in policy, a shift in governmental mechanism should be instituted. A federal state is better suited to multicultural territories like Nepal or it allows the concentration of resources in providing first-rate service to citizens and management of local affairs.

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