

## **LEARNING MATERIAL**

This is a draft learning material that can be illustrated for popular reading. It can be used also by students and teachers. - (submitted by Yemuna Sunny)

### **Language, nature and social domination**

Language helps us to share our ideas, feelings and thoughts. There are innumerable languages across the world. But a number of them have died.

Person 1: They are no longer spoken?

Person 2: Some people have dominated the homelands of others...

Person 3: ...so much so that even their languages are gone.

The homelands of indigenous peoples have been colonised by other groups. Even today their well-being, languages, knowledge and access to nature are threatened. The indigenous peoples are the original inhabitants of the places, and who are called 'adivasi' in India. Indigenous communities of people live in all parts of the world, and they have traditions and cultures that are distinct from the dominant culture. They are noted for their culture of revering nature, and of maintaining an equal society. There is also a deep connect between their languages and the biodiversity of nature, in which the peoples are embedded.

Biodiversity is the variety of life on earth. The largest varieties are found in the warm regions of the earth. Large scale deforestation and habitat destruction reduces biodiversity.

Person 1: Dominance over habitats...

Person 2: ...over indigenous peoples

Person 3: ...loss of biodiversity and of languages.

The largest numbers of languages that have become extinct or are nearly extinct belong to communities who are marginalised. Many languages that are called 'dialects' are considered to be 'lesser' than the standard language in a region or state. This is a dominant view, and is challenged by linguists who now prefer to call all of them as languages.

Person 1: How are people marginalised?

Person 2: By treating them as though...

Person 3: ...they are not important.

Language reflects the relations of people with nature, with each other and also reflects the power structures and dominations of society. So, there is a deep political and social connection between the marginalisation of people and of languages.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, G.A.Grierson, who was a member of the Indian Civil Service of the colonial British administration in the Indian subcontinent, began a survey of languages in British India, that continued for thirty years.

In 2010, the People's Linguistic Survey of India was started to update existing knowledge about the languages spoken in India. G.N.Devy, an Indian literary critic and a former Professor, had played an important role in this endeavour in which a large number of persons participated in the survey in all parts of the country.

You can read below some conversations of Devy from his book, 'The question of silence: A para-biography' (2019). In between these, you can also read the conversations happening between three friends.

GND - .....The census records the mother tongue of each citizen. Grierson's survey mentions 189 languages and 544 sub-languages or dialects. In 2006 the Central government formed a committee, of which I was the chairman. On the basis of records and information available, a list of 403 languages was prepared. These languages need to be supported because for lack of support they are dying. UNESCO had prepared an Atlas of indigenous languages three or four years back.

Question: Are languages on the verge of extinction like plant and animal species?

GND - There is a co-relation between the decline in biodiversity and languages because every language bears knowledge of biodiversity. In all the dialects or languages of Himalayas there are around 160 words for snow. The Eskimos have 30 words for snow. There are different words for snow falling from above, snow falling in muddy water. In Kinnaur language there is a specific word for the blue of the sky during snowfall. It is the dialects that contain the maximum knowledge of ecology, not subject experts. There is a direct correlation between the erosion of that knowledge and ecology. The decline in the number of trees and biodiversity is proportionate to the decline of languages and vice-versa. When biological diversity vanishes, only one language, one attire, one way of eating will remain in the world, whether one lives in the desert or in the Himalayas. Hence, we decided to undertake a survey of all languages. The work is under way. I have been touring all the states and conducting workshops to encourage local people to provide information. It is my wish to prepare a nice catalogue of the languages of our country. We have named this project 'People's linguistic survey of India'. Therefore, it has to be seen from the people's, from the speaker's point of view, not the government's.

Person 1: What is Kinnauri language?

Person 2: It is spoken in the Kinnaur district...

Person 3: ...of Himachal Pradesh.

‘Eskimo’ is a term used to refer to two closely related indigenous groups, the Inuit and the Yupik who live in the Arctic and subarctic regions. They live in a region extending from Siberia in Russia, to Alaska in USA, North Canada, Nunavik, Nunatsiavut, and Greenland. But the term Eskimo, is not used by the communities, instead it is a term coined by outsiders to describe the group. Many Inuit, Yupik and other indigenous peoples find the word unacceptable. Even as it is still used by historians and others, the governments of Canada and USA have made efforts not to use the term in official documents.

The language of the Sirenik people that is now extinct, is supposed to be related to the languages spoken by the Inuit, Yupik and other peoples in the region.

There are a number of communities who are nomadic, meaning their lifestyle is defined by movements from one place to another. These are often seasonal, like communities moving from the deserts of Rajasthan during the dry season, along with their cattle, to return during the rains. Similarly, there are communities in the Himalayas who come downhill during winters, along with their cattle, and return during summer. In both the cases, the movement is an act of balance done so that it helps them to survive extreme heat or extreme cold, in which cases it is not easy to obtain fodder for the cattle, on which their livelihoods are dependent.

During British colonialism, many communities who opposed the colonial capturing of their lands and resources were branded as criminal, especially those who used arms. These included many nomadic tribes.

By 1871 the British made a list of ‘criminal tribes’, and an Act was passed to regulate these peoples. They could be kept in confinement and made to work with very low payments. GN Devy notes that there are around 6 crore people in India who have been branded as criminal tribes during the British colonial rule. After independence, the Government of India withdrew the notification of such communities as criminal. But the attitude often continues to the present day as the police force and the people in general were encouraged by the British to look upon these communities as ‘born criminals’. They had already been alienated from their land during British rule and even after independence from the British, they have not got land’

(Source: Sunny,2022; pp 59)

GND - The languages of the nomadic communities in India are among the most affected by the identity issues of these communities. Imagine any stigmatised community. The first thing that the community like to do in order to secure its survival is to try and conceal its identity. Language is an identity marker for any community, but for nomadic communities it works as an identity marker far more pervasively. When these communities try to conceal their identity in order to escape the stigma attached them as ‘criminal communities’, one of the most obvious steps they take is to avoid using their language in the presence of an outsider. Thus, they use a state language (other than their own) for all activities in which anyone from outside the community is involved as in the market place, school, public places, etc and they use their own language only among themselves as a kind of ‘code language’. The natural consequence is that their own languages are getting skeletal by the day. In some languages of the nomads, the speakers no longer mention names of all seven days of the week or name more than two or three colour terms. Linguists will describe this condition of language as ‘reverse endangerment’.

Person 1: Endangerment means- a source of danger

Person 2: They were trying to cross over the danger...

Person 3: ...At the expense of their language

GND - Recently as I was preparing the People’s Linguistic Survey of Maharashtra, I came across nearly a dozen DNTs (Denotified and Nomadic Tribes) that had great difficulty in recalling even a single song from their oral tradition. Maybe, about half a century ago, they had numerous songs and stories used on all occasions and social functions. This is so sad. This imposition of silence on those communities- forced because the stigma is not by their own choice- I call ‘aphasia’.

Alas, so many languages are facing this threat. When the languages of communities are treated as a liability, the communities too tend to become economically further disempowered. One marginalisation adds upon another.... This is the lived experiences of the communities.

**For your reflections**

What does aphasia mean?

How is it being compared to people who are forced to lose their language?

Languages are expressions of ideas, meanings and thoughts. Languages have contexts. So, by losing a language, it is a loss of a social human context. Can you discuss this with your friends, and write about the issue?