



Bhasha Research and Publication Centre

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Language is the most crucial element of culture. It is the most distinctive accomplishment of humans, marking them off from other animal species. But, being made literally of mere thin air, language is also the most intangible among man's cultural acquisitions. It has taken humans about half a million years to develop this unique skill that has so profoundly determined how human societies are formed and how they carry out communication among themselves as well as how they hand down the collective knowledge from one generation to another. This greatest cultural acquisition of man has come under an unprecedented stress in our time. It is estimated that out of the approximately 6,000 living languages, a majority shall disappear in near future. UNESCO has already started bringing out inventories of 'world languages in danger.'

India has been home to nearly one out of every ten living languages. In 1961, nearly 1,100 'languages' were reported by the Census of India. Ten years later, in 1971, the census introduced a cut off figure of 10,000 speakers as the minimum qualification for including a language on the list and reported only 108 languages, negating the existence of nearly 90 percent of the living languages. This practice was continued in subsequent census reports. In 1996, I decided to establish Bhasha Research & Publication Centre (BRPC) in response to the situation of increasing 'language invisibility.' The term *bhasha* in most Indian languages means 'language, voice, identity, or definition.' The aim of BRPC was to provide appropriate platforms for the vanishing voices. Obviously, these were the voices of the indigenous peoples, hill communities, coastal communities, and itinerant nomadic communities. From the very beginning, we were aware that languages can survive only if the speakers of those languages survive. Therefore, our focus was never exclusively



An indigenous ritual painting from Gujarat, Babo Pithoro © Bhasha Research Centre

on linguistic studies. Rather, we made every aspect of the imaginative life of communities our concern, and we were mindful of the continuity of their livelihood practices.

We were convinced that the work had to be carried out by going to the communities and not by merely documenting them as outsiders. Hence, our main campus was established at Tejgadh, a tribal village situated in the middle of the indigenous habitat and surrounded on all sides by tiny hamlets of traditional knowledge holders who still practice this knowledge in their lifestyle. There, we set up non-conventional learning centers for people of all ages; a museum of 'voice,' which became co-curator of traditional wisdom; a healthcare initiative that looked at the human body from the perspective of the indigenous; and various self-help experiments promoting the livelihood practices of the communities. The institution at Tejgadh was called Adivasi Academy and entirely managed by the local people. It started attracting the nomadic and the indigenous from all parts of India and from other countries as well.

In 2010, we decided to produce the People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI). The need was felt particularly as the government of India had until then not carried out any comprehensive language survey since independence in 1947. The idea of PLSI

attracted a team of 3,000 volunteers from all walks of life. They ranged from university vice chancellors to bus drivers and simple farmers. When the PLSI was completed, we had gathered accurate information on 780 living languages in India. This is being published in 50 volumes spread over 35,000 printed pages. It is also being translated into Hindi and various other Indian languages. The PLSI was widely reported by media in India and outside and has inspired several other experiments based on community initiative.

BRPC has also done extensive work in revitalizing oral traditions combining folklore and the indigenous music. We have created a *bhasha-vana*, a 'language forest' with trees speaking human languages. This is done with the help of technology, but the idea is to represent our collective heritage as also our collective responsibility. We are now planning to do a global language status report (GLSR) purely with the help of volunteers who care for their intangible cultural heritage. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs, under the government of India, has accorded BRPC the status of 'Centre of Excellence.' More importantly, the indigenous communities, the hill communities, and the nomadic communities in India have accepted BRPC as their own 'voice.' Many awards have come our way, but the great affection and involvement of the communities is the greatest of them.



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