



Role of law and linguistic diversity in cultural protection of North-East India

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Abstract

Culture of any region or place is directly related to the language/languages spoken there. Therefore, to protect the cultural heritage of any place/region the protection, preservation and nurturing of its languages are a must.

North-East India is home to more than 200(two hundred) languages and it is the cultural as well as linguistic diversity of this region which differentiates it from other parts of the country.

This kind of linguistic diversity and multiplicity not only reflects the varied societal fabric but also very intricate and deep-rooted history of the region.

Keywords: North-Eastern india, cultural heritage, endangerment, multilingualism

Introduction

In every sense and connotation, it can be suggested that language is not only a means of communication but also a carrier of rituals, traditions, folklore, community identity, collective conscientiousness, tradition and beliefs.

Primarily, the languages of north-east India belong to five language families namely-Dravidian, Tai Kadai, Indo Aryan, Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman.

These languages are especially unique in the sense that they carry the cultural narratives, oral traditions and the traditional knowledge of the tribe and communities to which they belong and the knowledge, culture, tradition is transferred from one generation to another via them.

In a nut-shell, it can be said that they are the repositories of specific tribal and cultural identities.

A clear example of this can be seen in the “Garo” and “Khasi” communities of Meghalaya state where the matrilineal system of the society is very intricately intertwined with the language and linguistic practices of the tribe.

Similar is the case of “Bodo”, “Mizo” and “Naga” languages which directly as well as indirectly fosters the sense of unity among the speakers of the concerned language.

Cultural heritage and role of language

Despite the fact that the region of north-east has abundant diversity in terms of native languages, the challenge of endangerment of language is still there.

What is worsening the problem is the dominance of few languages over the others in the name of administrative convenience which indirectly tampers with the prospects of smaller languages (languages of the tribal people which is localized and is restricted to a specific sub-region) thereby hindering the idea of cultural protection and preservation. The most important thing to be noted here is the fact that whenever any language is endangered and subsequently vanishes and disappears, a unique and specific approach to interpretation of the world and various phenomenon also gets destroyed and that too forever.

It is not mere the “vocabulary” which dies but also the particularized approach of belief, wisdom, tradition and oral history which dies along with it.

The noteworthy thing here is the fact that it is not only an abstract idea but a hard-faced reality which haunts mankind and humanity because the extensive research work suggests that along with the decline of any particular language in any specific group the cultural patterns and practices also gets erased and this process is a non-reversible process in which it is almost impossible to get back to the basics again.

A classical example of the abovementioned view can be seen in the “Tai Kamti” tribe and group where loss of language resulted into the loss of ritualistic vocabulary and altogether abandonment of many of the ceremonies both religious and ritualistic by the people of the tribe/group.

These ceremonies which were being abandoned happened to be the unique feature of the group and were connected with their cultural ethos and identity but with passage of time everything got lost with negligible chances of revival.

Another often ignored aspect of proficiency in the regional language happens to be its ability to open new economic opportunities for the region as languages are not merely carriers of cultural elements but also the harbingers of economic activities by opening up new scope for cultural tourism, education and local self-governance.

It is a common observation that those areas and regions which have preserved the local culture as well as the local language attract more number of tourists for the reason that tourists crave for the original and authentic experiences.

This has the potential of boosting the local economy to a great extent for the reason that it creates livelihood for the locals.

Another important thing which is worth mentioning here is that the converse of the abovementioned situation also holds true for the reason that if the local languages of the community and the region is ignored and neglected and not given priority then students might struggle in their academics to perform well, as any learning is easier in the familiar language.

This in turn will have a negative impact on the aggregate

number of students completing their education and will increase the drop out rates drastically as students might find it cumbersome to continue. Mother tongue's recognition in the educational system can lead to more wholesome participation of the students on the one hand as well as the cultural knowledge being protected.

Institutional intervention

Multilingualism happens to be the solution to the problem of preservation and protection of linguistic diversity of the north-east region.

Regional and local languages can be recognized for being implemented as the language of administration as well as education for the young students and simultaneously government should take care of the fact that the learning resources, dictionaries, digital texts and other academic resources are being properly created so that languages are not lost in oblivion.

At the same time the folklore and oral traditional knowledge needs to be documented so that they might not get extinct in due course of time.

Another most important step which must be taken is that the proper training must be provided to the teachers who can enable the process of inter-generational transmission of knowledge.

Government, academic circles and the community at large, all have to come together and take the matter seriously so that proper justice can be done to this issue.

Legal and policy initiatives for cultural and linguistic protection

The legal and policy framework for the linguistic and cultural protection in the north-eastern region of India happens to be multi layered comprising of governmental policies, state laws, customary laws and constitution of India.

Legislations relating to preservation of both intangible and tangible rights are well supported by laws and legislations pertaining to intellectual property rights and tribal rights.

Various state policies also aid the process by making provision for promotion of major state languages in the education sector as well as for the official use.

Documentation, cultural programming and education are the means via which the linguistic heritage and the cultural aspects of the region can be preserved and promoted.

Government policies like the three-language policy can also be of immense use in the abovementioned context for the simple reason that in the implementation framework the idea of promotion of the regional language is embedded.

Similarly, the constitutional safeguards in the form of eighth schedule (which provides protection to certain languages), article 29 and article 30 help in safeguarding the language, script and culture of the region.

But since several of the north-east languages are still not recognized officially their prospects of protection and preservation are still limited.

Conclusion

North-Eastern cultural heritage is inseparable from its languages.

Multiple languages in this region shapes and constitute its social and cultural identities and not only are they important and relevant in creating a sense of uniqueness but also in promoting the socio-cultural resilience.

Law, policy initiatives and multiprong strategy are the key to solution.

The most important and noteworthy point which needs consideration in this regard is that the preservation of this linguistic diversity is relevant not only for the continuity of the traditional and cultural aspects of this region but also for the holistic growth of it.

Indeed, the need of today's world is the modern growth and development and this happens to be one the major concerns for all of us but with the inclusive academic curriculum and initiatives taken by the members of the community a balance can be made and a harmonical chord can be set which will be extremely beneficial from the perspective of north-east India's cultural heritage.

It can function as a pillar of socio-cultural harmony having the potential of unifying the intra-regional and inter-regional constituents.

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