

Socio Political and Cultural Dominance on the Minority Languages and Cultures --- A 21st Century Scenario

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Abstract

21st century visualizes several changes in India's overall political, educational, linguistic, cultural, and economic achievements / catastrophes. India's sociolinguistic scenario has experienced a remarkable transformation in the areas mentioned above. Some of these transformations may be progressive and some may be non-progressive or even can be termed as retrogressive. One can attribute several reasons for these changes. It is appropriate to say that the impact of globalization can be the main reason for the positive transformation India has experienced in the areas of technology, education, and competitiveness. In the meantime, it is not a misnomer if we claim that globalization, Indian language policies, planning strategies and different kinds of socio linguistic situations have contributed significantly towards the retrogressive metamorphosis of linguistic and cultural subsidence.

This paper tries to throw some light on how the impact of globalization and the government policies could negatively contribute towards possible downgrading or even elimination of the minority cultures and languages. This paper is based on the extensive field works conducted in the areas where the three minority tribal communities Urali, Muduga and Paniya live.

Keywords: Cultural dominance of the majority, Minority Languages and Cultures, Indian context, Urali, Paniya, Muduga.

Introduction

21st century visualizes several changes in India's overall political, educational, linguistic, cultural, and economic achievements / catastrophes. India's sociolinguistic scenario has experienced a remarkable transformation in the areas mentioned above. Some of these

transformations may be progressive and some may be non-progressive or even can be termed as retrogressive. One can attribute several reasons for these changes. It is appropriate to say that the impact of globalization may be an important factor for the positive transformation India has experienced in the areas of technology, education, and competitiveness. In the meantime, one may also claim that globalization, Indian language policies, planning strategies, and different kinds of sociolinguistic situations have contributed significantly towards linguistic and cultural subsidence, especially in the case of minority languages or dialects.

This paper tries to throw some light on how the impact of globalization and the government policies could negatively contribute towards possible downgrading or even elimination of the minority cultures and languages. This paper is based on the extensive field works conducted in the areas where the three minority tribal communities Urali, Muduga and Paniya live. They are distributed in the Sathyamangalam hill tracts of Western Ghats (Urali); Gudalur of Nilgiri belt (Paniya) and Attapaty one of the prominent forest areas of Kerala situated in the northeastern part of Palghat District (Muduga).

The focus of the paper is mainly on the factors which have contributed for the nature and extent of socio cultural and linguistic loss / switch experienced by the three ethnic communities under investigation. The two main contributors towards the disintegration of minority languages and cultures are

1. Political factors
2. Impact of globalization

Socio-Political Factors

The two major policy decisions of Government of India which disturbed the minority tribal communities of India are:

- i) The languages of the ethnic communities whose speakers are numerically less than 10000 are not listed as separate languages. Subsequent to this decision, since 1971 the Census of India has only been disclosing statistics of languages spoken by more than 10000 people, and as per the 2001 census there are only 122 languages.
- ii) Inclusion of many parts of the forest areas where several tribal communities live traditionally as reserved forests. As a result of this decision many ethnic communities are displaced from the locality where they were staying since generations.

The People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI), carried out between 2010 and 2013 and overseen by Ganesh Devy, a language conservationist, identified 780 languages and said there could be another 100. Devy in 2013 said India may have lost 220 languages since 1961.

This new study, the People's Linguistic Survey of India, says that the official number 122, is far lower than the 780 that it counted and another 100 that its authors suspect exist. It is unfortunate to note that for this discrepancy so far there is no convincing official explanation. This major political decision had cut strong in roads in the minority languages and cultures across India. As a repercussion to these political decisions, we could identify the following 7 areas the loss of which accelerates the process of losing their culture, ethnic proximity and ultimately irreparable damages caused to these minority societies.

1. Habitation

All these three ethnic communities living in the Western Ghats region are in proximity to the forest eco system and traditionally monoethnic settlements. They used to have a strong ethnic boundary based on ethnicity and kinship. Traditionally they had a food gathering economy. Due to different kinds of restrictions put forth by the Governments through the respective forest departments, their free movements inside the forest became difficult. Further, the government established colonies to settle tribal families in the villages situated in the fringes of the forest. These villages often accommodate more than one community.

At this level the communities could experience two types of radical changes. One change experienced is from **monoethnic settlement pattern to bi/multi-ethnic patterns** of neighborhood which means uninterrupted linguistic, cultural, and social contacts. Next change is from **independent economy** through shifting cultivation or food gathering to **bounded agricultural economy** by way of working in other's land or farm.

It is understood that the nucleus of the problem pertaining to the loss of their ethnocultural values started when they were disturbed from their traditional dwelling places which were in the jungles. This territory loss is not only one of the indicators for linguistic and cultural loss and shift but also inflict some demographic disturbances.

2. Education

Though the tribal children had initial schooling, often the drop out percentage is more at the higher level. When compared to Urali and Paniya, Mudugar are better in getting through formal education. Even at the time of initial schooling they are experiencing language related incompatibilities especially with the Paniya of Nilgiris and Urali of Dimbam. Non-recognition of their language by the school's administration/education department at least at the beginning stages of education became one of the main reasons for dropout rate and subsequent illiteracy. Apart from this, financial constraints, failure, family problems, sense of alienation are the other reasons attributed for the huge dropouts of tribal students.

3. Food Habits and Health

Traditionally these communities' common relationship with the ecosystem contributed significantly for developing indigenous medicinal system by giving more thrust to native medicine. Apart from that they used to have healthy, natural food products which are available plenty in the forests such as fruits, tubers, roots, leaves and various other products related to fauna. These contributed significantly to maintain the food requirements and nutritional status of the communities. In addition to this, they used to have their own ethnic medicinal system based on herbs collected from the forest and processed locally. They had their own system of diagnosis. But the current position is that the source of getting medicines are depleted or totally vanished in some areas. Subsequently, they are losing their knowledge system with reference to ethnic medicines.

Change of Food Habits

When the sources of getting their traditional food materials get affected, these communities often visit the neighboring semi urban localities where it is possible to find the new type of fast-food products. It is a common scene to see the tribal communities visit these places and relish the junk food which is the impact of globalization. It is needless to say that the drastic changes in their food habits have adversely affected the general health of the ethnic communities.

4. Dwelling

It is understood that the nucleus of the problem pertaining to the loss of ethnocultural values of the communities started when they were disturbed from their traditional dwelling places which were in the deep jungles. Since the Governments of Tamil Nadu and Kerala have formal regulations for utilizing the reserved forest land by the ethnic communities living in these areas, they do not have the freedom of movement as they used to have during the past. In the past the ethnic specific systematic dwelling places consisted of thatched houses built by the community on the basis of clan divisions. They have specific rules for that. The traditional structure of houses called *kuure*, *viidu*, or *mane* with two partitioned rooms and a kitchen got replaced by the government constructed single roomed terraced houses. Subsequently, they are confined only to the restricted areas designated by the Government. In most of the cases the communities could experience the following **TWO** major disturbances.

- i) Settlement patterns on the basis of the clan divisions got disturbed.
- ii) Traditionally monoethnic settlement patterns have changed into bi-ethnic or multi-ethnic neighborhood patterns. In some cases, even the outsiders and

plains men migrated to the forest areas and started living in close proximity with the tribal communities.

Owing to these imposed territorial restrictions and the other social problems faced by the community, some of the younger groups have opted for voluntary territorial dislocations in order to gain economic prosperity. All these added to the loss or disorientation of some of the fundamental and functional domains of the community such as parent children relationship, traditional values and the total loss of native languages.

5. Art and Artifacts

Though the three communities Muduga, Urali and Paniya are not very much interested in different types of traditional paintings, these communities are traditionally very good in music, especially Urali and Muduga. They used to have different varieties of instruments, both string and wind. The art of music and playing the musical instruments are passed from generation to generation. They have a wealthy collection of songs for various dances, and they are performed in several ethnic functions. Currently the situation has changed drastically. Most of the native instruments are lost. We could find the native instruments only in a few houses. That too the condition of the instruments is not up to the mark. In some houses they are kept as show pieces. Now they claim there is nobody among the community members to make these instruments and they are not able to get from the forest the particular sap of the plants to be used to temper the strings and the membrane of the drums. Above all they have difficulty in getting the particular wood from the forest to make the instrument. As far as the folk songs are concerned the current trend among the young is to have the modern music from television, cinema, and CD. But most of the older people and even the headmen of the community are interested in inculcating interest in the minds of younger group to learn these arts by following the ethnic norms and values. But it looks they do not show much interest in that. As far as Muduga community is concerned they have an inherent mechanism to revive the art of music among the younger generation people. Though this proposal is faced with lot of hardships, we should appreciate that at least some members of the younger generation people are regularly learning the art.

6. Religion and Religious Practices

Ethnic religions are distinctive in their relationship with a particular ethnic group and often in the shaping of one's solidarity with an ethnic identity. In the past, for all the three ethnic communities under study, though the religious concepts, terminologies, names of the native ethnic gods and goddesses and practices are different, the commonness is always seen with their overall lineage towards Hinduism to a greater extent. The major difference from the dominant

Hinduism is that these tribes have their own gods with different names and their native worshipping places used to be often deep inside the jungles. Currently the territorial dislocation of the tribal communities coupled with the loss of their land in the forests initiate the process of integration within a national, political, religious, and economic system. This made them to start worshipping in the Hindu temples along with the non-tribal communities. This transformation had paved the way for these ethnic communities to lose their indigenous knowledge system, the terminologies pertaining to native religious practices, and also the ethnic specific role of the tribal priests while conducting various ethnic specific religious practices such as marriage, puberty ceremony, death and birth ceremonies, etc.

7. Language and Communication

Language is one of the major unifying factors among all the ethnic communities to give the sense of oneness and easy expression. On enquiry we could identify that all the three ethnic communities have an inherent desire to develop their own languages and also to teach their children their mother tongues at least in the primary level education. This desire of the communities supports the policy of several research findings and also the policy of UNESCO.

For instance, globally, there are 50-75 million ‘marginalized’ children who are not enrolled in schools. Children whose primary language is not the language of instruction in school are more likely to drop out of school or fail in early grades. Research has shown that children’s first language is the optimal language for literacy and learning throughout primary school (UNESCO, 2008).

Paniya community members when they felt that their children should be taught in their mother tongue at least at the primary level, the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), Mysuru developed a preprimary reader in Paniya language. Some small modifications were made for the Tamil script in order to express Paniya sounds which are not available in Tamil. The content for this book was selected from the native stories, songs, folk tales, etc. When we introduced this book to the school, the dropout rate had been reduced considerably. But this effort of CIIL did not receive adequate enthusiastic support from the local education department and the whole project ultimately stopped. Since there is no initial schooling in their mother tongue the children have a psychological set back and have difficulty to cope up with communicating confidently. The current situation is that they feel that there is no use to put more effort to learn their mother tongues since it does not have any economic benefits for the community in general. Subsequent to this tendency, these communities have the tendency to lose their mother tongues. They have experienced a strong domain shift. That is, even in the home

domain there is a tendency for the younger generation to use the dominant language of the areas rather than their mother tongues.

Conclusion

It is clear from the above discussions that the statuses of traditional customs and beliefs practiced among the three tribal communities under study, their living environment, ethnic specific social and political organizations, etc., have changed considerably owing to the process of modernization and other socio-political pressures exerted by the dominant societies and the central and state administrations. These changes made their influence visible on the society. People are getting “civilized” day by day and their lifestyle is changing with time and so are the tribals’. Drastic changes are being perceived and the rich cultural heritage that once was the identity of the tribes is no longer being followed. These communities used to worship the nature, like trees and mother earth and they protected them, but today there are very few persons left who follow these practices. Ethnic specific ceremonies and celebrations and songs in their own languages are vanishing and, in its place, the modern film tunes and even the film verses are taken into their ethnic songs. Purity of the tribal language is not maintained. It is noted that the younger generation has lost considerable the unique features of their languages. The practices of miracle and healing through herbs was a knowledge and ritual that was passed on from their ancestors and these have almost come to an extinction, since most of them prefer visiting a doctor and moving to a hospital in case of diseases. On being asked if they believed that their children should have knowledge about their tribes, the response was invariably on the affirmative, yet on the other hand, they also want them to be educated and literate in the dominant language of the area as they perceive this will help them in their future and to be competent enough to be a part of the larger society. On being asked regarding the preservation of the native language, cultural activities like songs, dances, prayers, stories, etc., they have a mixed feeling that these things will not take them to go high in the social ladder.

The 21st Century Scenario of Urali, Paniya and Muduga in a Nutshell

<i>Definition of a tribe</i>	<i>Current position</i>
1. A group of distinct people, dependent on their land for their livelihood.	Mostly landless
2. Largely self-sufficient	Not self-sufficient
3. Not integrated into the national society.	Partial integration has taken place
4. Any group of people having the same	In a transient stage

Occupation, habit, idea, etc.

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