

Living languages and troubled tongues: Linguistic diversity and endangerment in the Himalayas

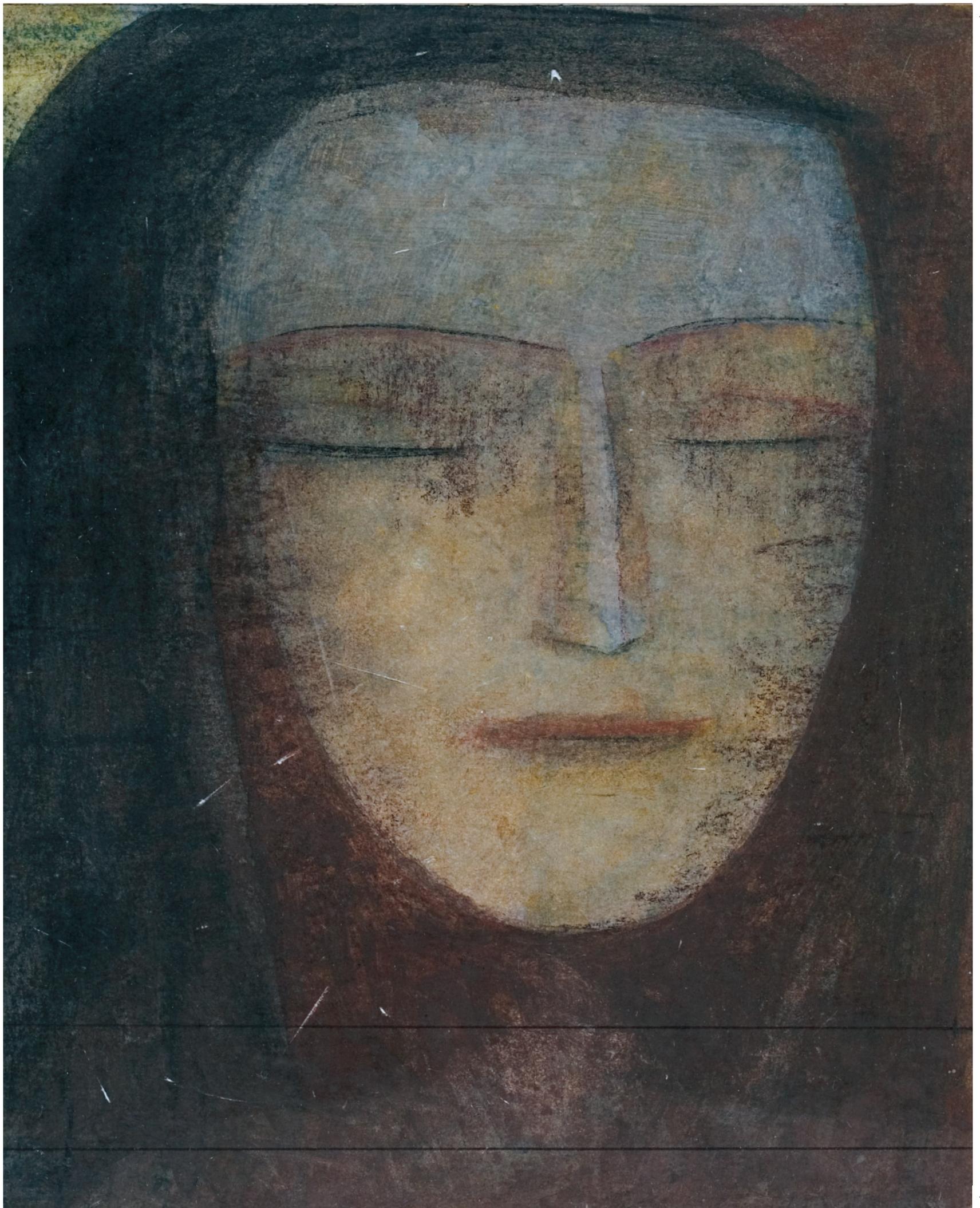
According to even the most conservative estimates, half of the world's 6,500 languages are expected to become extinct during the 21st century with around one language dying every two weeks.

Many of these declining mother tongues are spoken in the Indian subcontinent and across the Himalayan region. While the documentation of endangered languages has traditionally been the domain of linguists and anthropologists, international awareness about this impending linguistic and cultural catastrophe is growing, and a diverse set of organisations are becoming involved in the struggle to preserve endangered spoken forms.

What determines the vitality of spoken tongues? How can the cultural heritage of language communities across the Himalayan region be facilitated and sustained?

Ganesh Pyne, mixed media on paper, titled *Kuntala*, 8 x 8 inches, year unknown, collection of Vijay and Kajal Jain ►





Introduction: Diversity and endangerment

The Indian subcontinent sustains well over 1.5 billion people and is home to enormous linguistic diversity as well as many of Asia's most endangered languages. For example, India alone boasts at least 415 living languages, while Bangladesh is home to 39, Bhutan has 24, Myanmar 108, Nepal 123, and Pakistan 72 (Gordon 2005). The Himalayan reaches of South Asia have been described as one of the ten biodiversity 'mega centres' of the world. But this diverse region is also home to almost 20% of all human languages, so the area should be thought of as a linguistic and cultural 'mega centre' as well, and as a key site for the common heritage of all humanity.

While some of the area's languages are thriving, most notably Hindi, English, Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi and Nepali and other regionally-dominant tongues, a great many other spoken forms lie at various stages on the continuum towards eventual extinction. The key measure of a language's long-term viability is not the number of people who presently speak it, but the extent to which children are still learning the language as their native tongue and the number of domains and spheres in which the language is used. There are many ways by which mother tongues become endangered, including declining speaker numbers, and the transformation of the traditional habitat of a linguistic community through deforestation, or even natural disasters, such as landslides, which may sweep away villages and devastate small tribal communities.

More prosaic, if far more influential, reasons for the decline in the usage of mother tongues include decades of state neglect towards poor, rural ethno-linguistic groups, and the effectiveness of national education programmes and the international media in cultivating a sense of national or even regional identities. While state policy makers may speak of 'language shift' from a minority mother tongue to the national language, implying that the process is a trouble-free replacement of one tongue with another and a positive social transformation, members of the affected community may interpret this rather as an infringement on their cultural and linguistic rights, and a form of government-sponsored 'linguicide.' While the value judgement lies in one's frame of reference and perspective, it is clear that changes and challenges to speech forms, and particularly declining competence in traditional mother tongues, are thorny political issues.

Language death is often compared to species extinction, and the same metaphors of preservation and diversity can be invoked to canvas support for both biodiversity and language preservation programmes. Linguists and community activists have borrowed their conceptual framework, and even the associated jargon, from the fields of botany and zoology, and describe languages as lying on a scale from viable to extinct.

In India as well as Nepal, a disturbingly large number of ethnic and tribal mother tongues are severely endangered or even close to extinction, and will likely be reduced from communicative vernaculars to symbolic identity markers within a generation. At the same time, and perhaps even because of the threat, ethnic and linguistic activists within these communities have embarked on the process

of documenting and promoting their mother tongues through cultural awareness campaigns, ethnic heritage programmes and literacy projects. Successful language maintenance efforts ideally combine literacy and education with an improvement in the economic and political standing of the minority language community.

Does language death matter?

Why should we be concerned with the extinction of endangered languages? After all, given that 96% of the world's population speak 4% of the world's languages, and over 1,500 languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers, is it feasible or realistic to support minority tongues (Crystal 2000)? Some monolingual English speakers might have us believe that linguistic diversity is incompatible with the juggernaut of inevitable progress which requires interoperability and smooth communications across national and international boundaries, and that speaking only Hindi, English, Mandarin or Spanish will suffice. For most the world, though, and particularly in much of South Asia, most people are functionally bi-, tri- or even quadri-lingual, speaking an ethnic or tribal mother tongue at home, a different language in the local market town, conversing in a regional language at school or in dealings with the administration, and often using an international language (or two) in dealings with the outside world. Let us take Nepal as a case in point: an individual might speak Chintang at home, Bantawa in the bazaar, learn Nepali at school, speak Hindi when visiting a regional city close to the Indian border, and write in English to chat with friends online. We should not forget that the monolingualism of much of the western world is as provincial as it is historically anomalous, and that most individuals throughout history and across the planet have conversed in more than one language.

While the origins of the extraordinary diversity of human languages are intertwined with the evolution of cognition and culture, the spread of modern language families is a result of historical population movements across continents, and the colonisation of new environmental zones. Human languages exist where humans live, but are not evenly distributed across the world: there are relatively few languages spoken in Europe compared to an abundance in the Pacific, and the Indian subcontinent and greater Himalayan region are home to great linguistic diversity in part because the mountains act as a natural barrier to mobility and communication.

There are four clear reasons for supporting, preserving and documenting endangered languages, aside from the fact that in themselves, languages are fascinating:

First, each and every language is a celebration of the rich cultural diversity of our planet and the extinction of each mother tongue heralds the end of another slice of cultural uniqueness.

Second, every language is an expression of a unique ethnic, social, regional, cultural identity and worldview. When a language dies, the framework through which an individual interprets and interacts with the world in which she lives passes with her into extinction.

Third, an individual language is the repository of the history and beliefs of a people, and these oral traditions are rarely translated

into another language when the tongue in which they were created is about to disappear. With the extinction of each spoken form, gone are the myths, origin tales, songs and poems that gave a community its distinct identity.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly to a conservation or biodiversity-minded readership, every language encodes a particular subset of fragile human knowledge about agriculture, botany, medicine and ecology, lost forever when it ceases to be spoken.

As large multinational pharmaceutical companies are learning to their own financial gain, small-scale communities living on the margins of urban centres may have valuable knowledge about the workings and uses of plants and natural resources, not to mention innovative woodworking and basketry traditions which are as elegant as they are unique. Fair trade organisations promoting sustainable futures for indigenous peoples are increasingly promoting such products in international markets. Once again, as these communities become increasingly marginalised and their traditional livelihoods endangered, the local knowledge which they hold may be lost to posterity in the process of modernisation. Only in exceptional circumstances are indigenous languages and the knowledge systems which they encode documented, transcribed and translated for the benefit of future generations. Even if they are, as in the celebrated case of Sequoyah, the Native American Cherokee silversmith who invented the Cherokee syllabary for his speech-community, the documentation itself does not necessarily halt the processes of cultural erosion and decline which have already started. Maintaining languages entails more than supporting words, it requires the protection of livelihoods through building sustainable futures.

Mother tongues are made up of far more than grammar and words. For example, Thangmi (known in Nepal and India as 'Thami'), a Tibeto-Burman language spoken by an ethnic community of around 40,000 people in eastern Nepal and Darjeeling in West Bengal, is a treasure trove of unique indigenous terms for local flora and fauna which have medical, ritual or practical value (Turin 2003), not to mention stories, songs and the remembered history of the community. For example, a species of local walnut (*Juglans regia*), known in Thangmi as akar, has an outside shell which gives off a black dye when beaten, and this is used to paint house doors. The bark of the tree trunk as well as the leaves are used as a poison to stun fish, which is beaten and thrown in the water where fish are known to swim. The substance in the bark temporarily stuns the fish after which they float to the surface and can be collected. The poison does not affect humans and the meat of the fish can be safely consumed.

Any language is of course only a vehicle for the knowledge held



in the minds and in the collective memory of the people, but much of this knowledge falls into disuse as fluency in the tongue decreases. When children cease to speak their mother tongue, the process of oral transmission which has existed for generations also comes to an end. As Rana

Bahadur Thangmi, a local shaman and village leader, poignantly stated in an interview with the author a few months before his death, 'It upsets me that our language is dying and will likely not be spoken by the next generation. No one will think to translate into Nepali the understanding that our forefathers collected in order that our grandchildren may know what we have known and see what we have seen.'

Language and ecology: An Intimate symbiosis

Linguistic diversity is an integral component in supporting ecological stability and the delicate fabric of cultural life. While languages, like species, adapt to and reflect their environment, we should not forget that the evolution of a species or a language takes much longer than its eventual extinction. The Thangmi language mentioned above, spoken in a highly mountainous region where the landscape is harsh and the topography unforgiving, has four semantically distinct verbs all of which are translated into English as 'to come':

yusa 'to come from above (down the mountain)'

wangsa 'to come from below (or up the mountain)'

kyelsa 'to come from level or around a natural obstacle'

nasa 'to come from an unspecified or unknown direction'

In cases such as Thangmi, language mirrors ecology, and ecology can also reflect the linguistic and cultural forms of the people who inhabit a specific niche. The languages and cultures of millions of indigenous peoples of the Himalayas are now endangered in part because their traditional homelands and ecological habitats are under threat.

In the powerfully written *Vanishing Voices* (2000), Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine make an explicit link between environmental issues and linguistic survival. They argue that the extinction of languages is part of the larger process of near-total collapse of the worldwide ecosystem, and the authors suggest that the struggle to preserve environmental resources, such as the rainforests, cannot be separated from the struggle to maintain cultural and linguistic diversity and the understandings that humans have gathered about these unique natural worlds. The causes of language death and ecological destruction, in their view, are primarily political and also co-dependent.

Nettle and Romaine support their argument with an intriguing correlation: language diversity is inversely related to latitude, and ar-

areas rich in languages also tend to be rich in ecology and species. In short, both biodiversity and linguistic diversity are concentrated between the tropics and in inaccessible environments, such as much of the Indian subcontinent and across the Himalayan region, while diversity of all forms tails off in deserts. Around the world, there is a high level of co-occurrence of flora, fauna and languages, and humid tropical climates, forested areas and mountainous regions are especially favourable to biological and linguistic diversification. Data from Nepal appear to support this trend: the country is home to over 5,400 species of higher plants and 850 species of birds, 2.2% and 9.4% of the world's totals respectively (Shrestha and Gupta 1993). This particularly high level of biodiversity per unit area is matched by a similar degree of linguistic variation.

While the language ecology hypothesis is entirely logical, it remains contentious, with some language activists and scholars arguing that these overlapping trends are coincidental and causally unrelated. Whatever position we take on the interrelatedness of biological and linguistic diversity, one result is uncontested: languages are increasingly described as valuable 'resources' to be protected, promoted and developed by governments. Distinct from, but deployed in a similar manner to, discussions about water, fossil fuels and human resources, languages are an integral component of a nation's rich intangible heritage. As discretely summed up by UNESCO in its universal declaration of 2001, 'cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature' (UNESCO 2002).

Language and development: Education in the mother tongue

Every modern state must balance the often competing needs of centralisation and consolidation on the one hand, and support for its minority communities and cultures on the other. In India and Nepal, as in many other poor countries, this struggle can be particularly intense. A weak infrastructure combined with challenging topography can make planning and integration difficult, and minority causes have historically been marginalised or even jettisoned in the name of national unity. In much of South Asia, a principal vehicle for advancing cultural integration and political unity has been language.

42% or 476 million of the world's illiterate people speak minority languages and live in countries where children are for the most part not taught in their mother tongues (UNESCO 2003). India and Nepal are two such countries. The issue of mother tongue education can be highly politicised, in part because many assumptions



about the role of the state are attached to the various positions on this topic. Mother tongue education also means different things to its supporters and detractors: the former see it as a way to make schools more inclusive and receptive to the needs of children from minority language backgrounds, while the latter

fear that mother tongue medium instruction would be the first step towards ethnic federalism and linguistic autonomy, and the end of the modern nation.

But why is mother tongue education an issue at all? Instead of learning Nagamese or Bhojpuri at school, shouldn't children who speak minority languages at home be taught Hindi and English to give them the very tools they need to compete with mother tongue speakers of these languages? Won't focusing on their ethnic heritage just deny disadvantaged students access to higher learning and eventual positions of power? The counter arguments to these challenging and provocative critiques are clear, as John Daniel, Assistant Director-General for Education in UNESCO, has written, 'Years of research have shown that children who begin their education in their mother tongue make a better start, and continue to perform better, than those for whom school starts with a new language. The same applies to adults seeking to become literate.' (UNESCO 2003)

Curriculum development is an important element in the development of mother tongue language materials. Some government-funded mother tongue initiatives have simply translated the national language primary school books into minority languages, without regard for cultural difference. Such schemes are doomed to fail, since the content of a school book must reflect and build on the cultural values of its students.

As for the suggestion that if a student learns through his or her mother tongue, he or she won't learn the national 'let alone any international language' properly, we would do well to remember that most people are multilingual and that young minds have an amazing capacity to learn, absorb and process languages. It is not a question of either the national language or the mother tongue, since a number of languages may be taught simultaneously. Moreover, a student's failure to learn three languages to a high standard is primarily a failure of instruction and educational policy, not one of curricular overload, as many international monitoring reports have increasingly shown.

Language and culture

'To be human you must have a tribe. To have a tribe you must have a mother tongue,' stated a Shona tribesman, when asked by the fieldworker John Hofman for a definition of his identity (1977). While not a universal truth, this assertion encapsulates a widespread

sentiment held by both indigenous peoples—and those who study them—that language and identity are inextricably linked.

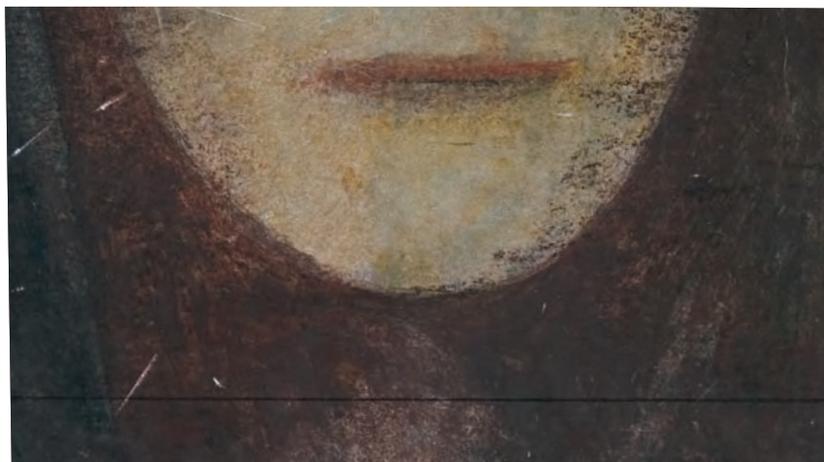
The United Nations recognises languages as forming an integral part of peoples' cultural and historical identities. In much of South Asia, linguistic and cultural identities are closely intertwined, and many of the region's indigenous peoples define themselves in large part by the language they speak. Language is often used as a symbolic badge of membership in a particular community, and can be a prominent emblem of pride in one's social or ethnic identity.

Sustainable futures: Promoting diversity

The preservation of a language in its fullest sense entails the maintenance of the speech community. Reversing language death therefore requires the preservation of the culture and habitat in which a language is spoken, and the extension of spoken vernaculars into new domains of use through standardisation programmes, literacy campaigns and by embracing the possibilities afforded by new communication technologies. Pop music in Marathi or online blogs in Lepcha are signs of linguistic vitality and resilience, and need to be encouraged to develop further. While many South Asian languages spoken as mother tongues will likely only survive as second languages in the coming years, that is in itself no small feat. Supporting minority languages and halting linguistic decline must become an integral element in securing the sustainable livelihoods of diverse communities. Integrated development programmes which focus on the vulnerability of marginalised peoples in the region should introduce a component of support for their languages which are presently under threat.

Language revitalisation campaigns aim to increase the prestige, wealth and power of speakers of endangered mother tongues, to give the language a strong presence in the education system and to provide the language with a written form to encourage literacy and improve access to electronic technology. Linguistic diversity is, after all, the human store of historically acquired knowledge about how to use and maintain some of the world's most vulnerable and biologically diverse environments.

As the writers of a hard-hitting UNESCO report conclude, 'If during the next century we lose more than half of our languages, we also seriously undermine our chances for life on Earth. From this perspective, fostering the health and vigour of ecosystems is one and the same goal as fostering the health and vigour of human societies, their cultures, and their languages. We need an integrated biocultural approach to the planet's environmental crisis,' (2003). International donors and governments must collaborate to involve



and mobilise communities to revalue indigenous languages. Nowhere is the urgency greater than in South Asia, where these rapidly vanishing voices are dangerously close to disappearing forever, taking with them the cultural heritage that makes the region unique. 🐦

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Weblinks

The World Wide Web is increasingly becoming a research tool through which publications, archives and legal documents can be conveniently accessed. Here, a list of informative and helpful websites are provided for readers who are interested. Due to the impermanent nature of Internet resources, however, the sustainability of the URLs cannot be guaranteed.

Biodiversity Hotspots

- By Conservation International, a website devoted to areas of great biodiversity <http://www.biodiversityhotspots.org/xp/Hotspots/>
- Digital Himalaya
A project developing digital collection, storage and distribution strategies for multimedia anthropological content from the Himalayan region <http://www.digitalhimalaya.com/>
- Documentation of Endangered Languages (DoBeS)
A Volkswagen Foundation initiative to document the world's endangered languages <http://www.mpi.nl/DOBES>
- Endangered Language Fund (ELF)
Supporting endangered language preservation and documentation projects <http://www.endangeredlanguagefund.org/>
- Ethnologue: Languages of the World
An encyclopaedic reference work cataloguing all of the world's 6,912 known living languages <http://www.ethnologue.org/>
- Foundation for Endangered Languages
To support, enable and assist the documentation, protection and promotion of endangered languages. <http://www.ogmios.org/home.htm>
- Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project (HRELP)
A documentation, academic and archiving project based at SOAS in London <http://www.hrelp.org/>
- World Congress on Language Policies
<http://www.linguapax.org/congres/indexang.html>