

Cambridge project to preserve rare Indian and other languages

LONDON: The University of Cambridge has launched a unique project to provide universal access to languages of India and elsewhere that are endangered and part of the world's disappearing spoken traditions.

The open database, called World Oral Literature Project, has been developed by the University's researchers and is available at the following URL: www.oralliterature.org.

In India, the projects include ethnographic documentation of the literature and culture of the indigenous Mudugar and Kurumbar communities in Palakkad district of Kerala using digital video, audio and photography.

Another India-based project is a 20-hour-long recording of a ballad about the life and adventures of Tejaji, the Snake Deity, sung by the Mali community (gardeners) in Thikarda village of Bundi district in Rajasthan, along with the documentation of Tejaji customs and traditions in the Hadoti region of the State.

The recordings will be transcribed and translated from

Hadoti into Hindi and English and distributed as books and DVDs.

The project will also keep records of 3,524 world languages, ranging from those deemed "vulnerable" to those that, like Latin, remain well understood but are effectively moribund or extinct, the University sources said.

Other projects on Asia include a year-long assignment to collect, record, transcribe and translate Torwali oral literature with the full participation of the community in Pakistan, building on the ongoing Torwali dictionary project supported by the National Geographic.

In Nepal, the project includes recording, transcribing and translating the oral literature of the Ngadag Lamas of Nubri, and four weeks of fieldwork in Mustang, during which 51 songs from the orally transmitted Kha Lu repertoire were recorded, tran-

scribed and translated.

Researchers hope that the pilot database will enable them to "crowd-source" information from all over the world about both the languages themselves and the stories, songs, myths, folklore and other traditions that they convey.

Users can search by the number of speakers, level of endangerment, region and country.

In the United Kingdom, the site lists 21 disappearing languages, ranging from the relatively well known, like Scottish and Welsh, to obscure ones like Old Kentish Sign Language.

"We want this database to be a dynamic and open resource, taking advantage of online technology to create a collaborative record that people will want to contribute to. At present, the world has more than 6,500 living languages, of which up to half will cease to

exist as spoken vernaculars by the end of the century," Mark Turin, Director of the World Oral Literature Project said.

In most cases, their disappearance is a by-product of globalisation, or rapid social and economic change, he added.

The project aims to document and make accessible these spoken traditions before they are lost without record.

"While some severely endangered languages have been well documented, others, which may appear to be less at risk, have few, if any, records," Dr. Turin said.

"Here in Cambridge we are interested not only in language endangerment levels but also in what might be called a 'documentation index.' To this end, we are locating references to and recordings of oral literatures in collections around the world. Of the 3,524 languages listed, about 150 are in an extremely critical condition." In many of these cases, the number of known living speakers has fallen to single figures, or even just one. — PTI

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