

Mind your language! Save dying 100

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HRD ministry plans rescue effort in schools & varsities

New Delhi, March 2: The Union human resource development ministry is set to launch a programme to save over 100 Indian languages that are fast vanishing.

The programme would include setting up departments in central universities to study the dying languages and work towards their promotion, introduction of these languages as school subjects in areas where they are spoken, and schemes to mobilise communities to continue the language traditions.

While the ministry can start language departments at central universities on its own, it will have to consult the state governments for the other two initiatives.

The proposed schemes would be finalised at the June 2 meeting of the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) that has all the state education ministers as members.

The ministry took these decisions on the basis of recommendations of an eight-member panel that was set up more than six months ago to suggest ways of protecting the endangered languages.

India has around 196 endangered languages, including about 80 in the Northeast, according to the Unesco Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger 2009.

The Unesco's endangered-language category includes languages that face the threat of becoming extinct because of a fall in the number of people speaking them.

The government, however, does not agree with the Unesco list which it says has put certain dominant Indian languages within the endangered category.

The Unesco list, for instance, has described Manipuri (Meitei), the Karbi language of Assam and Khasi in Meghalaya as endangered languages.

The ministry's eight-member experts panel had said the government should undertake a detailed survey of dying languages in Arunachal Pradesh, where several languages are in danger. Many languages in Arunachal and other north-eastern states have less than 10,000 speakers each.

The next CABE meeting is expected to discuss certain schemes that will offer incentives to the speakers of minor languages to continue using them. The details are yet to be worked out.



MANY FACES, MANY TONGUES, SOME IN DANGER

A look at dead and dying Indian languages

EXTINCT

Pali and Ahom, among others. Bo of the Andamans died in February 2010

THREATENED

Over 100, mostly tribal languages

EXAMPLES

- Yakha, Koda, Kharia Thar (Bengal)
- Saura, Kui (Orissa)
- Vishavan, Thachanadan (Kerala)
- Zakhring, Koro (Arunachal)
- Aiton (Assam)
- Sunam (Himachal)
- Ralte (Mizoram)
- Phudagi (Maharashtra)

PRESERVATION PLAN*

- Introduction at schools in catchment areas; perhaps as fourth language
- Jobs for speakers, scholarships for students of these languages
- Departments in central universities to study these tongues

** To be finalised*

"The idea is to start schemes under which the speakers of minor languages may get certain employment or earning opportunities," a source said.

Another suggestion from the experts panel was to introduce short courses in endangered languages at primary school level. The government will consult the states on how to implement this.

The proposed language departments in central universities can set up libraries or museums with audio and video material showing the oral traditions of these languages. Such documentation is expected to help preserve these tongues, and the audiotapes could be used as teaching tools within the communities.

The question, though, is whether some experts studying a dead language in certain universities can bring life to a dying language.

Even as tens and thou-

sands of Europeans have been studying Latin at schools and colleges for centuries and have a certain grasp over the language, it remains a dead language still.

"A living language has speakers who use it for communication," said Lawrence D. Kaplan, director of the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska.

He said a language survives through its speakers but it is not necessary that it be the speakers' mother tongue. The mother tongue is the language a person learns automatically from family and society.

Mark Turin, research associate at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities in the University of Cambridge, agreed.

He cited the examples of Nagamese, a creole that is a mixture of the various Naga languages and

Assamese and is spoken by many in Nagaland although it is not any one's mother tongue.

Turin said a lot more had to be done apart from setting up language departments in universities. "The government's effort to set up language departments is a good step in documenting and preserving the Indian languages.

But steps have to be taken for revitalisation of language through community participation, education and giving economic and social benefits," Turin, also the director of the World Oral Literature Project, told **The Telegraph** over the phone from Cambridge.

Turin said India had an incredible amount of linguistic diversity but there was a variance with respect to the importance being given to languages. He said one could speak of a caste system of languages in India.

There are hundreds of spo-

ken languages but they were often treated as less valuable. This was regrettable.

"The federal government and the state governments should provide education in such languages. The government has to demonstrate that the local languages are important and valuable. There have to be economic and social benefits for the people for continuing to speak the language," he said.

According to Prof Omkar N. Koul, former director of the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), certain languages face the threat of extinction as they are not used as mediums of instruction in educational institutions, government transactions and the media.

"If a language is not getting sufficient role in these three domains, there is every possibility that it will die. The fate of a number of languages in India is the same

as they are neither used for education or governance purpose," he said.

Koul said the best way to keep a language alive was to prepare instructional material in that language and make it part of studies. For dialects that do not have scripts, he said, the Roman or Devanagari scripts may be used when writing.

Social and economic pressures drive once-isolated communities to assimilate and adopt the popular languages of the region, he said. Any language becomes endangered if it is spoken by a minority and is held in low esteem, forcing its speakers to avoid use or to pass it on to their children.

There are quite a few such languages in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. For example, Onge is spoken only by 96 people and Shompen by about 200. These languages face a high risk of extinction

in the near future, he said.

Koul said no one knew how many minor and tribal languages existed in India at present. The Constitution protects the right of children to learn through their mother tongue.

The states are supposed to arrange for the teaching of all minor or minority languages in schools having at least 10 students who speak these languages as their native tongue. But in practice, most state governments discourage the use of minor languages in schools.

Language is an efficient means of transmitting culture from one generation to another. People from a certain culture are at a great loss when a language is not used in social domains in a meaningful way.

The forced migrants from Kashmir, now scattered across the country and abroad, face a kind of identity crisis because

identity is closely associated with language, Koul said.

Panchanan Mohanty, professor and coordinator, the Centre for Endangered Languages and Mother Tongue Studies at the University of Hyderabad, said the economic power associated with a language was very important for its survival.

"English is very important because it gives good jobs to people who are learning it. Apart from jobs, some sort of prestige is attached to the speakers of English in India," he said.

So, there should be an assurance of jobs or some sort of earning if the speakers of minor languages continue to speak it. One option could be the introduction of a scholarship for students who choose to study a minor language as a fourth language.

At present, many schools follow a tri-lingual format under which students study their mother tongue, English and Hindi.

Another reason for language endangerment is a feeling of upward mobility among speakers of a minor language when they shift to major languages, Mohanty said.

"Speakers of major languages should be sympathetic to other minor languages," he said.

As most of the tribal languages face an extinction threat, state governments should make it mandatory for government officials in those regions to learn the local language.

He said nearly 100 languages in the country are certainly in danger. But the degree may vary from language to language. The endangered languages could be categorised as extinct, moribund, critically endangered, seriously endangered and potentially endangered.

While certain languages like Pali and Ahom have already become extinct, the majority of tribal languages are in danger.

These include Saura and Kui in Orissa; Aiton in Assam; Zakhring in Arunachal; and Yakha, Koda and Kharia Thar in Bengal; Vishavan and Thachanadan in Kerala; Sunam in Himachal Pradesh; Ralte in Mizoram and Phudagi in Maharashtra.

Mohanty said the proposed departments in central universities would be of help in saving the languages. But these departments may face difficulty in getting resources necessary to undertake the projects.