

When human beings go past language

The People's Linguistic Survey of India, which Ganesh Devy spearheads, is on the final leg of its journey in recording India's living languages. Devy is now focused on studying how long it will be before we move away from speech-based communication



Ganesh Devy, chief editor of the People's Linguistic Survey of India. Photo: Pradeep Gaur/Mint

India is one of four countries, along with Nigeria, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, with the largest number of living languages. Since 2010, in a project initiated by Prof. G.N. Devy, founder of the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre in Vadodara, a large team of scholars has been conducting a comprehensive survey of Indian languages, publishing their findings in state-wise volumes from 2013 onwards. This month, the *People's Linguistic Survey Of India (PLSI)* brought out another 11 volumes, taking the total to 37, and proposes to complete its task of publishing 92 books by 2020.

Prof. Devy's interest in documenting languages doesn't come from any form of romanticism about preserving them, but from a keenness to further livelihood opportunities for the speakers of these languages.

At an event in New Delhi presided over by former prime minister Manmohan Singh, Prof. Devy also spoke of a new project that he is leading: the Global Language Status Report (GLSR), which proposes to cover 6,000 living languages around the world, and assess how long they will survive. He believes it may not be long before we become a world without languages and move on to an image-based means of communication. In the first phase, research teams will start work this year with Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and India; they hope to publish the findings by 2020. Edited excerpts from an interview:

Will the ‘PLSI’ project end with the publication of 92 volumes in 2020?

With that, this project makes a beginning. After every 10 years, it will be updated. I’m an old man, but we already have a team in place for the next two decades. We have chosen a symbol for this project, a great painting by Gulam Mohammed Sheikh of a tree, half of which dies, and half comes to life. Similarly, the project will never end.

The ‘PLSI’ has recorded 780 languages. Have you covered all the living languages?

We could not capture another 70-80 languages, which maybe 10 years from now we will. Some were in disturbed areas: Mizoram, on the border of Myanmar. Some because they came to our notice after the volume was prepared. Some because of interpretation. The coastal languages of Gujarat—we have seven, but now it comes about that there is an eighth language. That’s because community names are nearly identical. We have issued an appeal that if anybody identifies a language missing, they should report to us.

The 1961 census recorded 1,652 mother tongues. The ‘PLSI’ has recorded 780 languages. Are the rest dead?

The term mother tongue does not have a fixed meaning in the English language. Sometimes it means the language of the area, at other times the language of the family, at times the language of the biological mother. The census list of mother tongues is a very accurate report of what every citizen of India (said) they speak. These 1,652 names of languages are actually mother-tongue labels. The census itself does not determine whether something is a language or not; it’s scholars who (do).

They concluded that at that stage there were approximately 1,100 languages. The others were subsets of languages, duplications of the same language or names of non-languages which data-entry persons entered. You know, for 256 of the labels, there were less than five speakers, which means they were errors. Out of the approximately 1,100 languages, we have identified 780. About 70-80 might have escaped our attention. So I will put the figure at 850. That is, 250 no longer exist; they have disappeared.

Is the primary motivation behind 'PLSI' to save languages from disappearing?

The primary motivation is elsewhere. After print technology came to India, the languages which developed printed literature were put in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution after independence. Those languages were considered for giving full statehood during the linguistic reorganization. In the process, the languages which do not have the status of a scheduled language, they were divided between states. Gondi is now spoken in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Odisha and a bit of Andhra Pradesh . Bhili is divided between Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Santhali is divided between Bengal, Jharkhand and Bihar. So Santhali, Bhili and Gondi, they are major linguistic zones, but because of the division, they become minority languages.

So, in the educational structure, their importance is less. Therefore, their ability to provide a livelihood to people is diminished. So, the effect on people's lives: Migration starts, their cultural loss is tremendous, their traditional knowledge collapses. It leads to cultural loss, knowledge loss and social and economic imbalance. So we thought it is good to provide a voice to these languages and register their linguistic citizenship in the official records. That was the motivation.

Most of us involved in the survey were not linguists who were romantic about having documented the languages. That is not the passion; the passion is that people who speak these languages must survive.

And has the state taken note of your findings and responded?

After our work was done in 2013, the then education minister invited me to give a presentation. He had called the census authorities and officials from the education and culture ministries. At the time, the census department, which had also been doing a survey for the last seven Five-Year Plans, which means 35 years, had completed the survey of four states. After the presentation, they

decided to change the orientation of their survey. They said, now the linguistic survey is done, we will do audiovisual documentation of languages. This is one impact.

Secondly, the University Grants Commission set up a special committee and they wrote a glorious letter saying that your linguistic survey work should be immortalized and we would like to release a very big grant to you. Eventually, the grant did not come, but the letter has come.

When we see television debates about diversity, and people state our country has 780 languages, it is clear to me that their impression has come from *PLSI* data. It is part of national folklore. People know that such a thing has happened.

I think our country has tremendous diversity. We are among the four countries in the world with the maximum number of languages: Nigeria, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and India. All other nations are talking about the decline of languages. I wanted to talk about the great diversity of living languages; the presence of languages rather than the death of languages. I'm not here to bemoan the death of a language, but to celebrate that such a diversity exists. If we don't pay attention, even that will go.

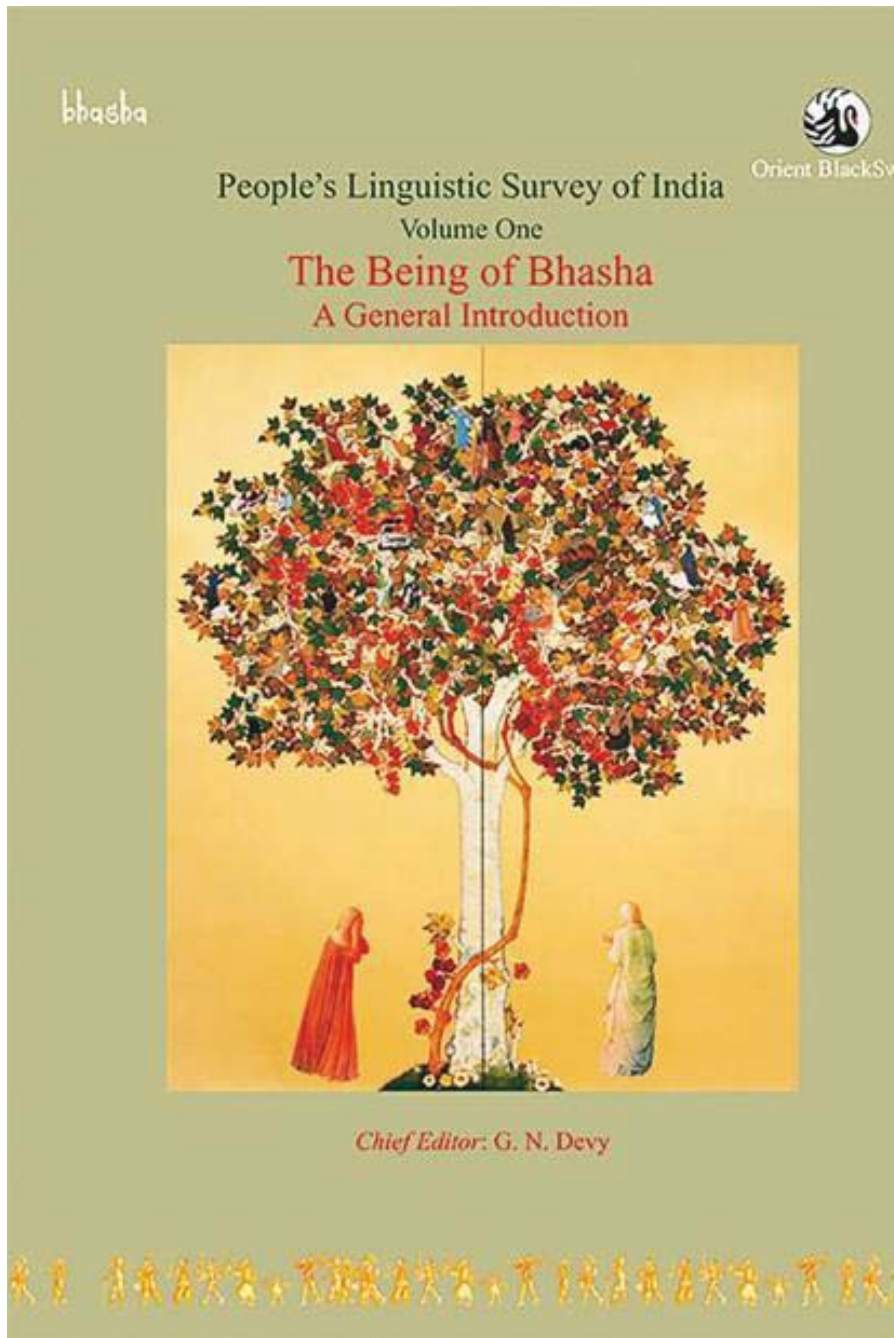
Since 2013, when the last batch of books was published, what are the interesting findings?

Scripts—initially I thought there were 66 scripts in the country; now I find there are more ways of writing. Then, Dakhani, spoken in eastern Maharashtra and parts of Telangana, is acquiring a higher status than before. Earlier, people used to laugh at it. That prejudice against Dakhani speakers has gone down. Even non-Dakhani speakers have switched to Dakhani.

Code-mixing (mixing two languages or language varieties in speech) in India is a direct result of political oppression. Look up Tripura and Kerala and you will find very small languages which should have disappeared, they are actually gaining status. In Gujarat, Bhili has gained status, Dakhani in Maharashtra and Telangana is gaining status. The reason is in oppressive political systems. Wherever governments identified Naxals as existing, in that state some small language has suddenly started going up.

We have not done enough anthropological study on this phenomenon but it is like, if there is a very fearsome father, you notice the child starts grumbling. It's the same relationship with the state that the small communities have.

Some small language starts becoming active, developing new words, new ways of irony, humour, satire, metaphor. The best indicator of political dissatisfaction is fluctuations in language use. In Russia, such studies have been carried out.



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The GLSR that you have started working on now is an extension of the 'PLSI'?

The *PLSI* is a snapshot of languages. In GLSR, we are going to do a *janampatri* of languages, a horoscope. I am going to predict for how long every language will remain alive, survive. This (*PLSI*) is about the present of the language, that is about the future of the languages. It will ultimately say when human beings will go past language as a means of communication. It will show a world when we are without languages.

Is that even possible?

The first 200,000 years of its existence, the homo sapien used theatre as its language. It was a pre-lingual, pre-voice-based language: moving hands, bending bodies, enlarging your eyes, scratching your head, patting on the back. Then we used tonal languages, like when you say hmmm, or if we laugh. That laughter is not Hindi, it is universal. We started using sound-based languages only 70,000 years ago.

Humans have passed through these communication phases: theatre, music, voice. Now we are very, very rapidly moving into a new means of communication, which is image-based communication. The semantic payload of the words will be reduced. We'll use visual languages more. That is because we have 85 billion neurons in the brain which does analysis of the sounds we hear and draws meaning, saves the memory of the meaning, retrieves them. That takes a little longer because the sounds go to the neurons through the ears; the images go through the pre-frontal cortex and take much less time. That means less energy is required.

So now, instead of the left side of the brain, which does the language analysis, it is the pre-frontal side of the brain which is becoming more active. This won't take too long; it can happen in another 100 years, or 1,000 years. That's why oral languages are dying. And new image-based ways of communication are emerging.

You were also involved in a Unesco project to conserve languages.

Unesco had conceptualized a world-class institute on this subject. I was asked to draw out the concept. But there was a tussle among 16 nations about where this work would go. And the result was very interesting: It did not go anywhere.

But then Unesco made a second attempt. They have drawn up a set of 33 parameters to determine the health of languages. It wants to do a survey of all living languages in the world. What I'm doing (in GLSR) is not a survey of living languages. A survey is always about the present of a language. I'll do an assessment of the future of these languages. That's why it is called status report. Will it survive or not? Mathematical modelling is one way of doing this.

Is it important, in your opinion, to make an effort to conserve languages?

It is very important in my opinion to conserve the wisdom that these languages have gathered. That wisdom should be taken forward. I am not a lover of language just for the sake or love of the language, I have no romantic engagement in languages. Languages are extremely important because they are the holders of culture, of collective memory. So all that a given language holds, that needs to be taken forward in some format and handed down to the next generation. The best way to conserve a language is to create livelihood, opportunities for those who speak the language. Otherwise they will migrate to another language zone and their own language will disappear.

You have been involved in an effort to create livelihood as well?

When I started work with tribals, I started first with livelihood. I must confess: I am not a trained linguist. I started teaching literature and because I saw that many languages were disappearing, I started feeling guilty about drawing my salary teaching English literature. We cannot stop the flow of time and languages coming up and going down. But livelihood support can be helped. And I had done that for the first 20 years in a limited geographical area of nine districts of Gujarat. My work benefited about 800,000 families. That is not enough. If we take into account all the declining languages now, that number will go up to about 200 million. Language is still not an evident consideration in the economic planning of the country.

If a language is not recognized and the community feels the language has no market value, they collectively and unconsciously decide to give up on that language. Nobody keeps a language going just for the pride of it. People feel speaking Hindi is a good idea, but they all feel that learning English is a better idea. If livelihood opportunities are not there, people start giving up on languages. If there's no education in the mother tongue, children tend to drop out when they go to the high-school stage. If there is no technology such as TV, mobile apps, printed material, then the status of the language goes down in

the eyes of the people. They will discard those languages because there is no market for those languages.

What's your view on the imposition of Hindi across states?

Governments never give birth to any language. No government can end a language. Governments better keep off the language issue. Language is the most democratic among the systems that humans have invented. Government policy is immaterial to languages.

The reason cited is the simplicity of communication in such a diverse country. Does that make sense?

No, that's my fear. In communication we need complexity, not simplicity, because there is a lot to communicate. All of it cannot be communicated in a single language. Having more languages allows us to communicate more.

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