National Conference

THOLKUDI

PRESERVATION AND PROMOTION OF TRIBAL CULTURAL HERITAGE

Book of Abstracts

Adi Dravidar and Tribal Welfare Department
Government of Tamil Nadu

Centre for Social Justice and Equity
Madras School of Social Work

List of Contents

Mullu Kurumba House

Preface

Tmt. G. Laxmi Priya IAS
Secretary to Government
Adi Dravidar and Tribal Welfare Department
Government of Tamil Nadu

As we gather for this national conference on the preservation and promotion of tribal cultural heritage in Tamil Nadu, we stand on the threshold of a significant moment in our collective journey. Our diverse tribes, each with their unique traditions, languages, art forms, and social practices, are crucial threads in the rich tapestry of India's cultural heritage. The Geographical area of Tamil Nadu is 1,30,058 Sq.Km. There are 37 tribal sub-groups in the State and Malayali, Nari Kurarvar Toda, Kurumbas, Paniyan, Irular, Kattunayakan, Kanikkar, Palliyan, Kadar, etc. are the major tribes. Of which Toda, Kota, Kurumbas, Kattunayakan, Paniyan and Irular have been designated as 'Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups".

The Integrated Tribal Development Program (ITDP) and Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) are some of the policy frameworks addressing tribal development exclusively. A scheme called the 'Tholkudi' is being implemented in the state with the vision to enhance the living standards of the Scheduled Tribes community through improved infrastructure and to enhance the economic status of through livelihood programmes along with the mandate to preserve and promote rich and varied tribal cultural heritage.

As part of Tholkudi, we aim to document the linguistic resources and phonetic forms of the tribes such as Todar, Kothar, Solagar, Kani and Narikuravar from an ethnographical perspective. This conference aims to bring together scholars, tribal leaders, policymakers, and cultural activists to engage in meaningful dialogue about the challenges and opportunities facing our tribal communities. It is imperative that we work together to safeguard their traditions, promote their languages, and support their art forms, ensuring that the voices of the tribal people resonate in contemporary narratives.

Throughout this conference, we will explore various themes, including sustainable development, the role of education in preserving tribal identity, and the importance of inclusive policies that empower tribal communities. We will also celebrate the richness of tribal culture through workshops, performances, and exhibitions, showcasing the artistic expressions that have been passed down through generations. Together, we can create a roadmap for the preservation and promotion of tribal cultural heritage that honours the past while paving the way for a vibrant future.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all participants, speakers, and organizers for their commitment to this vital cause. May our discussions here lead to concrete actions that uplift and empower the tribal communities of Tamil Nadu and beyond.

Together, let us celebrate the vibrant cultural diversity of Tamil Nadu's tribal communities and pledge to safeguard their heritage for future generations.

Thank you.

Foreword

Tmt. R. Uma Maheswari
Additional Secretary
Adi Dravidar and Tribal Welfare Department
Government of Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu is a land of rich tribal cultural heritage despite of its tiny percentage of tribal population. It has equally rich linguistic landscape, encompassing several tribal languages such as Toda, Kotha, Irula, etc. However, the silent disappearance of some tribal languages poses threat to irreplaceable tribal cultural treasures. This conference serves as a rallying point to safeguard these endangered languages, ensuring their continued existence as vibrant threads in the fabric of our nation.

The loss of a language is not merely the silencing of words; it is the extinguishing of an entire cultural and intellectual heritage. It is the erosion of stories, songs, and rituals that have been passed down through generations, shaping the very identity of a community. In the face of globalization and modernization, tribal communities often find themselves caught in a tug-of- war, pressured to abandon their native languages in favour of dominant ones. This assimilation, while seemingly offering opportunities for social and economic advancement, comes at a steep cost – the erosion of their unique cultural identity.

This conference stands as a resolute commitment to reversing this trend. We aim to create a platform where diverse voices can be heard, where the challenges faced by endangered tribal languages are acknowledged, and collaborative solutions are forged. Our focus extends beyond mere preservation; rather we envision a future where these languages are revitalized, embraced by younger generations, and integrated into the mainstream discourse.

The conference will delve into the rich tribal cultural tradition of Tamil Nadu by focusing on tribal languages, showcasing their unique linguistic features, oral traditions, and cultural significance. The Conference will explore the challenges faced by these languages, including the impact of globalization, acculturation, and technological disparities. Additionally, we will examine successful language revitalization efforts from around the world, drawing inspiration from their innovative approaches and strategies.

Let us embark on this journey together, with a shared commitment to preserving the rich linguistic heritage of Tamil Nadu, ensuring that the voices of its tribal communities continue to echo through the ages.

Rationale of the Conference

Mr. S. Anna Durai CLS
Director
Directorate of Tribal Welfare
Government of Tamil Nadu

Language is not just a medium to communicate our thoughts; it also transmits culture and cultural practices. The demise of any culture will not happen as long as the practitioner of its language is alive. Thus, to safeguard a culture, it is necessary to keep the language alive. India is one among the 12 megadiverse countries listed, with a huge linguistic diversity. Henceforth, it is necessary to maintain the linguistic and cultural diversity of the landscape. Socialization is one such process, in which, the children are allowed to learn the culture through language and cultural practices. This alone will not be sufficient to keep the language and culture alive.

Linguistic minorities are a parlance we are all aware of, whereas, ethnolinguistic minorities are the members of the ethnolinguistic groups like tribals that are so small, but have their own distinct language and culture. The ethnolinguistic minorities are increasingly abandoning their native language in favour of another language. Such abandonment is not by choice but by compulsion to assimilate with mainstream culture and to finding an employment opportunity elsewhere. In this context, the purpose of this conference is to preserve, promote and revitalize those indigenous tribal languages of Tamil Nadu by all means and would thus preserve the culture and the multilinguistic and multicultural diversity of the state.

In the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022 - 2032) we organize this conference to ensure preservation, promotion and revitalization of the tribal cultural heritage of Tamil Nadu.

PLENARY SPEAKERS

Ms. Junhi Han
Chief of the Culture Sector
UNESCO South Asia Regional Office in New Delhi

She joined the UNESCO Multisectoral Regional Office for South Asia based in New Delhi in 2018, after having worked for more than 20 years at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris.

Being specialized in World Heritage conservation and management, from Paris she undertook a number of technical missions for the World Heritage Committee to assess and monitor state of conservation of WH sites, but also developed/implemented/coordinated a number of UNESCO's flagship projects for cultural heritage sites, such as Bamiyan, Herat and Jam (Afghanistan), Mohenjo-Daro (Pakistan) and Koguryo Tombs and Mural Paintings (Democratic People's Republic of Korea), Angkor (Cambodia), the Altai Mountains of Siberia, to quote a few. Since 2018, she has been spearheading programs of the UNESCO New Delhi Culture Sector for the South Asian countries. A curator by training,

Dr. Madhan Karky
Founder & Research Head
Karky Research Foundation
(Language Computing and Digital Literacy)

Madhan Karky is an Indian lyricist, screenwriter, research associate, software engineer, and entrepreneur. Following his tenure as an assistant professor at the College of Engineering, Guindy, Karky, who holds a doctorate in computer science from the University of Queensland,Australia. He also founded the Karky Research Foundation (KaReFo), an educational research organization that specializes in language literacy and computerized language learning.

As a multifaceted personality being a rare combination of proficiency in computer science and linguicism. A digital native, he has craftily used technology in language research and computing. In the field of Language computing, he has developed chol,online dictionary, PiriPori - Tamil Morphological Analyser, Emoni - Rhyme Finder for Tamil,Paeri - Name Generator,Paadal - Lyric Portal,Kural - Online Portal for Thirukural.

As director of I paadal technologies Ltd manages an online portal and apps for indie music and has created DooPaaDoo - Online Web Portal - Data Design,Search and Ranking Algorithms. Developed the spell-checking component of a word processing application for the regional language, Tamil. As research associate in Anna university, he has worked on projects sponsored by the Ministry of Information Technology, India, as a part of its Resource Centre for Indian Language Technology Solutions (RCILTS) for Tamil. Contributed to- wards designing and building structural components of high-level semantic functionalities for the development of various software packages for Tamil. He has penned lyrics for 600 songs and dialogues for Tamil movies as a dialogue writer and lyricist.

Introduction

The above inspiring lines from the 9th century Tamil poem of Purapporul Venbamaalai by Iyanaarithanaar claims that the indigenous/tribal people of Tamil Nadu have been around for long, say ever since the rocky mountains appeared but before the sand was formed. The comparisons highlight the ancient origin and existence of the Tamil indigenous tribes. The verses of Iyanaarithanaar bring forth the scientific, anthropological and geological significance, thereby proving the illustrious heritage and culture of Tamil Nadu.

Sangam literature (2nd century B.C. to 3rd century A.D.) had categorised five divisions of land based on the terrain and defined "Mullai Nilam" (Mullai, a flower found in this land, nilam=land) or the mountains & the adjoining landscape to be the abode of the indigenous people.

Sangam poetry has also documented the human geography in poems such as Mullaipaattu. The unique culture, music, dance and musical instruments and lifestyles of the mullai (forest/mountain) thinai people was beautifully described in Mullaipaatu. Furthermore, the poems celebrated the heroic deeds of the natives like taming the bull, the worship of horns of female buffalo, the rearing of cattle like buffalo, cow and sheep, food etc. Fine details of how their marital relationship was influenced by the nature of terrain, modes of transmitting knowledge and practice of cultural values expressed in poems are a reflection of the community's collective memory.

As per the UN, understanding the tribal or indigenous languages is of vital importance to ensure the continuation and transmission of culture, customs and history as part of the heritage and identity of indigenous peoples. 'It is usually estimated that there are between 6,000 and 7,000 oral languages in the world today. It is ironical and intriguing to know that most of these languages are spoken by very few people, while a handful of them are spoken by an overwhelming majority of the world. About 97% of the world's population speaks 4% of its languages, while only 3% speaks 96% of them (Bernard 1996). A great majority of these languages are spoken by indigenous peoples, and many (if not most) of them are in danger of becoming extinct.'

As highlighted by the United Nations Secretary-General at the opening of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2011, "one indigenous language dies every two weeks". Hence, preservation and transmission of tribal communities' collective memory and such rich tapestry of tribal past, assumes greater significance in the present context.

The Conference on Preservation and Promotion of Sustainable Strategies of Tribal Cultural Heritage of Tamil Nadu to be conducted by Adi Dravidar and tribal welfare Department, Government of Tamil Nadu is a pioneering effort of bringing together experts, scholars, and language and cultural enthusiasts to explore the strategies targeted towards to the preparation of a repository of methodologies to protect the tribal culture of the state. This conference will provide a great platform and opportunity to revitalize the tribal culture and the languages by examining how the tribal languages can flourish, thrive and adapt in the rapidly evolving socio-cultural milieu of Tamil Nadu.
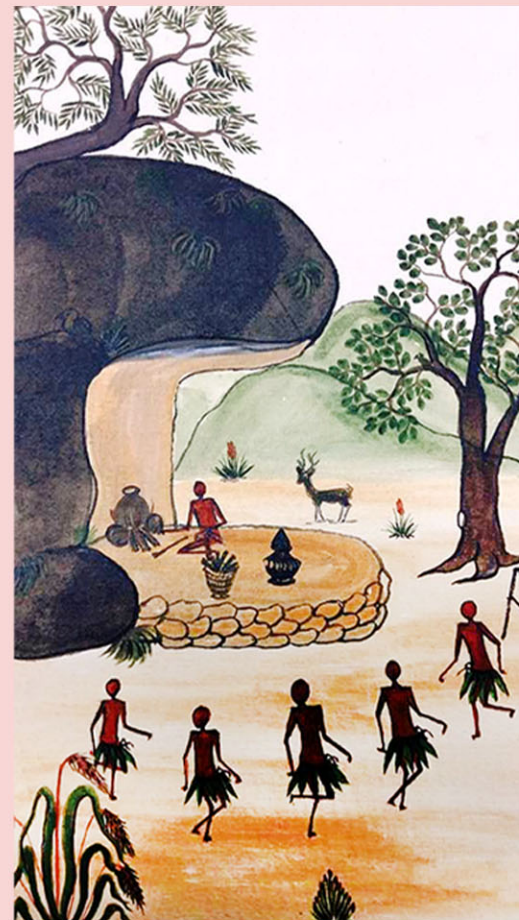
Kurumba Painting -Illustration of their life

Policy Framework

Tamil Nadu has a vibrant tribal population. It has 37 different tribal communities, of which six communities are particularly vulnerable communities. They have unique expressions and identities in terms of language, art and crafts and lifestyle. Despite Tamil Nadu having a scant tribal population, it is known for its tribal diversity. Some of them are equally inhabited in the plains as well. Most of these tribal groups are primitive in nature. Tribal development is one of the priority goals of governance in Tamil Nadu. The Integrated Tribal Development Programs and Comprehensive Tribal Development Programs are some of the flagship programs that brought tribal development upon the governance radar.

Recently, the Government of Tamil Nadu has announced an ambitious muti-tasked program known as "Tholkudi" meaning "Primitive Society". Under this new initiative, the government aims for the holistic development of the tribals encompassing the material and cultural aspects of development. Since the material component of development such as livelihood, housing, health and education has been adequately addressed through various schemes and programs, the cultural component of tribal development with special attention to the conservation and promotion of tribal cultural heritage assumes significance.

Indeed, the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003 made it an obligation for every signatory state to conserve and safeguard the intangible cultural heritage. As one of the signatories of the UNESCO Convention, India is bound to safeguard the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of its tribal people.

According to the UNESCO, tangible heritage includes buildings and historic places, monuments, artifacts, etc., which are considered worthy of preservation for the future. These include objects significant to the archaeology, architecture, science or technology of a specific culture.

Toda Embroidary

Intangible heritage includes the practice, representations, expressions, kno skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated and recognised as part of their cultural heritage by the communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals of a tribe.

Translating the spirit of the UNESCO Convention into viable public policy endeavour is a challenging task. Nevertheless, the Tholkudi program aims to address these challenges by evolving methods and mechanisms for safeguarding the tribal cultural heritage in Tamil Nadu. In this context, the Adi Dravida and Tribal Welfare Department of Government of Tamil Nadu plans to convene a national conference on developing a policy framework for preservation and safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage of tribes of Tamil Nadu, particularly the endangered tribal languages.

Theme I

Endangered Tribal Languages and Oral Tradition

Toda Embroidary

The Todas constitute one of the six Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in Tamil Nadu, primarily residing in the Nilgiris district. They inhabit various regions named 'Toda Nadu,' 'Kundha Nadu,' 'Peranga Nadu,' 'Merku Nadu,' and others across the Nilgiris district. Their settlements are called 'Munds.' According to their legends and folklore, their community are two sub-groups known as 'Thortharsh' and 'Theyvildh.

The Toda embroidery, or "pukhoor" as it is known locally, is a type of art created solely by the women of the Toda pastoral people of Tamil Nadu's Nilgiris. The finely finished embroidery has the appearance of woven cloth, but it is actually made using red and black threads on a white cotton background. The Toda people are proud of their past and the embroidered fabric is useful on both sides. The shawls and cloaks with embroidery are worn by both men and women during their special occasions.

How and Why to Preserve More-Than-Language
Safeguarding Tribal Intangible Cultural Heritage of Tamil Nadu

Prof. Sadhana Naithani

The importance of language as carrier of cultural and historical identity is well established and can never be overstated. Yet, it is not always very clear how the elements of identity are coded in the language. One may, simply, preserve the language by documenting and archiving the everyday usage of language in human communication. While acknowledging the linguistic importance of the method, this paper proposes to step beyond the language of everyday communication. "How and Why to Preserve More-Than-Language" emphasizes separate documentation of expressive oral cultures, that is, stories, songs and proverbs, which constitute Intangible Cultural Heritage of indigenous communities as specified in the UNESCO Convention on Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Stories, songs and proverbs are obviously a record of language, but they are more than a record of language. They express, among many other things, more complex uses of language where language combines with art of storytelling or singing or creating short memorable linguistic pieces (proverbs) that contain deep wisdom. These oral expressions contain more than language: they contain people's thinking about nature, about society, about supernatural and about ecology of the region they are located in.

The interpretation of all these needs to be understood from the heritage bearers. Therefore, safeguarding tribal Intangible Cultural Heritage, requires well-considered methods that respect the communities and proceed with their participation.

First, this paper outlines why tribal intangible cultural heritage of Tamil Nadu is important for the policy on safeguarding tribal cultural heritage; how it can be safeguarded so as to be relevant to contemporary realities, aspirations, and growth of the concerned communities, and how the documentation of tribal oral cultural heritage can spread knowledge about it amongst the majority communities in Tamil Nadu. Second, this paper sketches a practical plan of safeguarding oral intangible cultural. This plan will be explained with reference to its aims and purposes as also how technology can be used to create more thorough records than before. The practical plan with also include how community members will themselves be involved in the decision making and the execution of the plan. Third, this paper proposes ways in which the knowledge held in the oral expressions of tribal communities can be disseminated within and outside the community through educational institutions.

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About the Author

Sadhana Naithani is Professor at the Centre of German Studies, and Coordinator of Folklore Unit, JNU, New Delhi. She has been the president of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (2016-2024) and is a Fellow of the American Folklore Society. She has been awarded Fellowships by the DAAD, the British Council and Fulbright Foundation. She has been a Visiting Professor in Department of Anthropology and Folklore at the University of California, Berkeley in 2007 and 2022-23. She has also been a consultant on several films on folklore, and has made ethnographic films on German villages.

Kota Musical Instruments

The Kota, a Scheduled Tribe, resides in the mountainous Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu. Among the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), the Kota are recognized as artisan tribes and trace their origins back to droplets from the gods Aynor and Amnoor. They are referred to by names like Kov, Kota, Kotas, and Koter, with the term 'Kota' believed to signify 'King.'

The Kota community venerates Aynor and Amnoor, which are visible in temples across all their villages. Fine hand-carved rifle butts and double-reed instruments (kol) were manufactured by the Kota artists. The "kik" baskets made by the Kota women are essential for specific ceremonial events. Their musical instruments, the kol (double reed), tabatk (frame drum, tambattai in Tamil), Dobar and Kinvar (cylindrical drums), and kob (brass horn), are made from the hides of goats and oxen. Formerly, buffalo horn was utilized to manufacture their long, curving horns, known as kob.

On Suggesting the Policy of Induction of 'Living Human Treasures' in the Preservation & Documentation of Tribal Cultural Heritage of Tamil Nadu

Dr. C. Maheswaran

On the preservation and documentation of Tribal Cultural Heritage, the UNESCO (2003) has suggested engaging and supporting of the 'Living Human Treasures' who are the indigenous tribal peoples involved in the task of practising and propagating the tribal cultural heritage, the 'Intangible Tribal Cultural Heritage', along with the associated products of 'Tangible Tribal Cultural Heritage. Taking this cue, the author of this paper has already identified such 'Living Human Treasures' among the 'Toda Embroiderers', 'Kota (Women) Potters', Alu Kurumba Graphic Artists' in the Tribal Nilgiris and taken painstaking efforts nurturing their respective tribal cultural heritage as well, with the genuine aim of preserving and documenting them for the posterity.

A long way is ahead in going further in this direction in achieving the desired goal. The 'Geographical Indication (G.I.) Tag' was obtained for the 'Toda Embroidery'; The obtaining of requisite 'G.I. Tag' for the Alu Kurumba Painting Tradition' is on the anvil; And the nurturing of 'Betta Kurumba Basketry' is on the proximity. Accordingly, in this paper, a fair attempt is made in suggesting the appropriate 'Government Policy' in identifying such 'Living Human Treasures' among the various 'Retainers' and or 'Practitioners' of Tribal Cultural Heritage in the whole of Tribal Tamil Nadu.

About the Author

Dr. C. Maheswaran is the former Director of Tribal Research Centre and the former Curator of Department of Museums, Government of Tamil Nadu. He has worked on the indigenous speech varieties of Pachaimalai Malayali Tribes (of Tamil Nadu), Kui-Kandha Tribes (of Odisha), Betta Kuruba Tribes (of Karnataka) and Adiyan Tribes (of Kerala) and published extensively in the fields of Comparative Dravidian, Lexicography, Dialectology and endangerment of indigenous cultures and languages. He was UGC Visiting Fellow ((2016-2017) at the Department of Dravidian & Computational Linguistics, Dravidian University, Kuppam and currently he is the Senior Fellow of ICSSR, New Delhi at the Department of Linguistics, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore.

Kattunayaka Musical Instruments

The Kattunayakan derive their name from the words 'kaadu,' which means 'forest,' and 'nayakan,' signifying 'leader' or 'chief.' They are also recognized as Kattunayakan and use 'Naickar' as their title. Primarily residing in the Nilgiris, areas adjacent to Wayanad district in Kerala, they inhabit 59 villages in the Pandalur and Gudalur taluks. They have a unique traditional culture. they are the indigenous inhabitants of the Western Ghats.

Music plays a vital role in their day-to-day lives. People interested in music and dance practise their craft in their free time. One can find flute-like instruments in every household. Other instruments that form the Kattunayakkan musical ensemble are Arai (drum), Thambattai (drum), Kuzhal (Aerophone), Gedjai (anklet) and Thaalaa (cymbals). Musical instruments occupy a place of honour in the Kattunayakkan household, placed in boxes that hold sacred items.

Oral Tradition as Symbolic Register

Prof. T. Dharmaraj

Language is nothing but the symbolic register - a concept from Lacanian psychoanalysis - of a community, which encompasses its shared meanings, values, and cultural codes. It is through language that individuals become subject of a society to communicate, interpret, and transmit collective experiences, norms, and beliefs, to be embedded in the social fabric. The symbolic register is not just a conscious construct but also deeply tied to the unconscious - the underlying assumptions, desires, and identities that language carries over generations.

When a community loses its language, it risks severing this vital link to its unconscious. The subtleties of thought, emotion, and cultural nuance embedded in linguistic expressions become inaccessible. The loss of language disrupts the transmission of intergenerational knowledge and erases the deeper layers of identity tied to that specific mode of expression. In this sense, language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a vessel for the collective unconscious, preserving the unseen frameworks that shape how a community understands itself and the world. Without language, the community may lose its deeper, unconscious connection to its heritage and worldview.

At the core of human experience is lack, the sense of something missing that drives individual to seek fulfilment. This concept of lack, central to psychoanalytic theory, is what makes humans long for "something" that is other than themselves. These longing shapes desire and propels individuals toward identity formation. When a community loses its language, it loses this lack - the very thing that keeps desire alive and propels individuals to seek meaning and connection with the world around them.

Safeguarding an endangered language is nothing but preserving the collective unconscious, i.e. the symbolic register or oral tradition of a society. Oral traditions are often misunderstood as mere artistic expressions - stories, songs, or performances that serve an aesthetic purpose. However, they are much more than that. Oral traditions are crucial tools for shaping the 'I' and the 'other' within a community. Through storytelling, rituals, and spoken narratives, oral traditions transmit the cultural values, beliefs, and historical consciousness of a society, while also defining the boundaries between individuals and their surrounding world.

About the Author

Prof. T. Dharmaraj is Professor of Folklore at the Department of Folklore and Culture Studies, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai. He is an Associate Member of the Folklore Fellows, an International network of Folkloristics, Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, Turku. He carried out an ethnographic study on a tribal community called 'Kaanikarar' and produced a documentary film on the community. He was involved in collecting tribal and folk visual motifs for a project on 'Ethno semiotic study on visual representation of folk crafts and arts' to IGRMS (A museum of Mankind), Bhopal.

Kota Black Pottery

The Kota, a Scheduled Tribe, resides in the mountainous Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu. Among the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), the Kota are recognized as artisan tribes and trace their origins back to droplets from the gods Aynor and Amnoor. They are referred to by names like Kov, Kota, Kotas, and Koter, with the term 'Kota' believed to signify 'King.'

Only women from the Kota tribe are permitted to work in the art of Kota stone ceramics. Unlike most other artworks that employ clay, kota pottery uses black stone. The products' exquisite, detailed carvings will provide a lovely touch to your house. The women of the tribe perform all tasks, including the extraction of the material and the molding, shaping, and burning. The tribe uses their stone ceramic items not only for religious purposes but also as everyday goods for cleaning, cooking, storing water, and using as utensils. In the village, the women even engage in bartering, offering grains in exchange for ceramics.

Theme II

Teaching and Learning Resources of Tribal Endangered Languages

Irula Festival

The Irular, the second-largest Scheduled Tribe in Tamil Nadu, are known as Malainadu and Malaidesa Irular in the Nilgiris region. They are primarily a food-gathering tribe and favour residing in dense forests near hills and streams. Comprising 12 clans, they traditionally follow a non-vegetarian diet. Their religious practices revolve around worshipping deities such as Lord Amman, Ayyan, and Lord Rangaswamy.

The Irular community extends its presence to various districts of Tamil Nadu, those are named as 'Plain Irulas' spread across the districts including Kanchipuram, Tiruvallur, Chennai, Vellore, Salem, Villupuram, Tiruvannamalai, Namakkal, Tiruchirappalli, and Coimbatore

The Irulars commemorate Masimagam, which falls on the first full moon night of the 11th month in the Tamil calendar known as Masi, with much pomp and circumstance as a rebirth of the goddess. With a grand procession leading the idol of Kaniamman into the ocean, the nightlong celebration begins in all its festive splendor. Following the goddess, the Irulars make a commitment to her by walking in the numbers 7, 16, or 21. Community-curated dance, play, and musical acts are showcased in the cultural arts.

Preparation of Instructional materials in endangered languages and teaching and learning strategies

Prof. Sam Mohan Lal

Among various socio economic and environmental factors, empirically it is proved that every community irrespective of their numerical strength invariably tries to maintain their language and culture. If the language of the community is lost, slowly and systematically several other components of their culture will also be lost. For instances, in such situations the community might lose their folk tradition, ethnic specific cultural activities etc. But, the present scenario in different parts of India is that the tribal languages are experiencing endangerment of their languages owing to several socio economic and political reasons. It is needless to say that education always provides knowledge, skills and values to be successful materially and the cultural and linguistic inputs of the community are essential for the success of education itself.

This important aspect of language learning in their own mother tongue, most of the indigenous communities are deprived of. UNESCO too is always advocating for mother tongue education in order to attain quality learning at least at the earliest years of schooling. But, in Indian situation most of the children from the tribal communities are taught in a language other than their mother tongue. This not only compromises their ability to learn effectively, but also develop knowledge gap which has the negative impact on the process of acquiring learning contents and comprehension. This can be avoided to a greater extent if the Government of Tamil Nadu can introduce especially in the primary level mother tongue education in order to increase the speed of learning process and better comprehension. "However, today, tribal children in many of the states in our country, get an early education through a language which is unknown to them and that is pedagogically a second language to them" (Gnanasundaram, Sam Mohan Lal.1996)

This policy paper highlights the various components of curriculum being used in pre - primary and primary levels of schooling by keeping in mind the kind of exposure tribal children require which are akin to the environment they live in. Also, the structure of the instructional material to be used is also discussed in brief.

About the Author

Dr. Sam Mohan Lal was Professor cum Deputy Director at the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Manasagangotri, Mysore. He was also a Visiting Faculty at Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur and in the University of Nanjing, China. He supervised the linguistic and cultural documentation of the Tribal languages spoken in Andaman and Nicobar Islands. He has published on Urali tribe and its language and Pattola- Paniya Pre School Primer.

Paniya Dance

'Paniyan' is derived from 'Panikar,' signifying 'labourer.' They inhabit 174 villages across Gudalur and Pandalur taluks. Historically, they were subjected to servitude and worked as labourers for affluent landowners.

Paniyar Kali

A masculine dance performed by men of the Paniyar tribe. The dance is characterized by a circle formation, rhythmic movements, and the use of primitive percussion instruments like the Karu, Para, and Udukku.

Vattakali

A dance performed by women in a circle, accompanied by the thudi, a small drum-like instrument and singing.

Save My Mother (tongue)
Sustainable Language Policy to Preserve and Revitalize
Indigenous Cultures of Tamil Nadu

Prof. Anvita Abbi

An appropriate language policy to preserve and sustain the Indigenous languages of Tamil Nadu is the only way to promote resilient ecosystems that support culturally important attributes and knowledge systems encoded in the tribal languages with a rich history of hundreds of years of survival despite the lack of any institutional support. The human-nature symbiosis that the tribes have attained is represented in their languages which, unfortunately, have taken the path of oblivion due to neglect, negative attitude, and promotion of monolingualism in the state language. The inextricable link between language, culture, and knowledge needs to be appreciated by the administration to promote and revitalize Indigenous languages and reconnect them with our sustainable cultural heritage and sustainable future. The presentation will try to outline the measures that can be taken to achieve this goal.

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About thr Author

Prof. Anvita Abbi is an internationally acclaimed linguist and social scientist for her work on indigenous languages. She received Padma Shri in 2013 from the President of India and the Kenneth Hale Award from the Linguistic Society of America in 2015 for her lifetime contributions to documenting Indian languages. She identified a new language family-the Great Andamanese-a moribund language that is key to understanding the peopling of Asia and Oceania. She has widely published in language typology, language contact, multilingualism, and grammars of tribal languages. She taught Linguistics for almost four decades at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. At present, she is an Adjunct Professor at the Department of Linguistics, at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada and serves as a member of the Expert Committee of the UNESCO World Atlas of Languages.
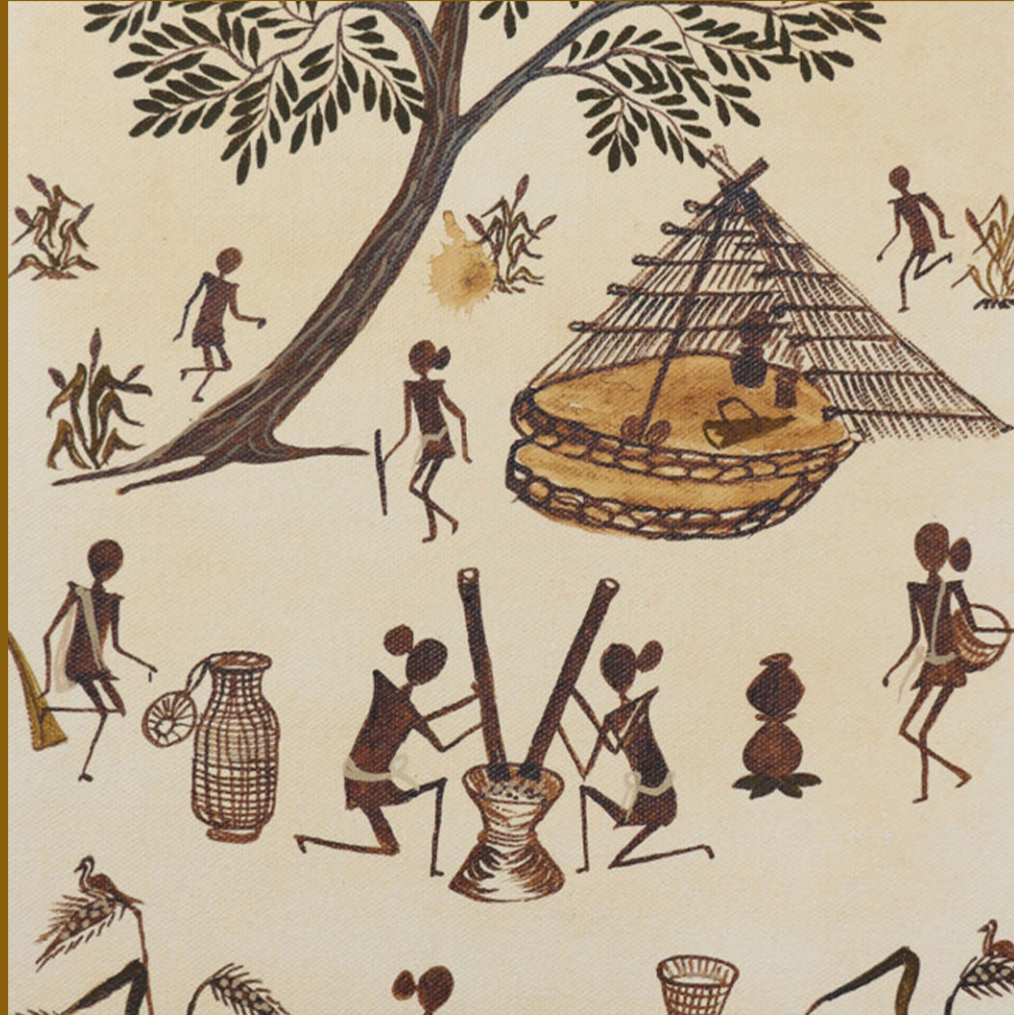
Kurumba Painting

The Kurumbas predominantly inhabit the western regions of the Gudalur taluk in the Nilgiris district, extending into the adjacent district of Wayanad in Kerala and some southern districts of Karnataka. In the Nilgiris, they are classified into Alu, Betta, and Mullu Kurumbar.

Alu Kurumbas exhibit exceptional skill in painting, historically utilizing rocks as canvases for their art. Their oral tradition thrives through folk songs and tales.

The above painting explicits the everyday life of Kurumbas; wherein the Kurumba women engaged in millets punching.

A Critical Dialogue on Teaching and Learning Resources for Endangered Tribal Languages in India

Prof. Minati Panda

This paper discusses two major transdisciplinary multilingual textbook/pedagogic projects of India - Erai Erai and MLE plus - that were developed and tried out in areas with high tribal concentration in Odisha in 1999. Both Erai Erai and MLE plus projects were founded on the ideas of seamless linguistic fluidity of India including tribal areas and the unique human human capacity to multi-/translanguage. It instituted a new way of looking at Indian multilinguality and the linguistic and social creativity of children in a state that had been imagining multilingual education within a bilingual transfer model borrowed from the European-American experiments of 1960s and 70s. Erai Erai was built on the shared liberatory intellectual resources of teachers and educational administrators created by a series of seven attitudinal training programmes organised in Odisha between 1996 and 1997 (Panda, 2016). We worked continuously with forty educators: 25 Saora teachers, 10 Odia teachers and 5 educational administrators (former teachers) and brought about a new vision of a child who possesses a unique capacity to multi-language, creates new linguistic and conceptual repertoires and develops reflexive capacities in the process of discovering new knowledge (Panda, 2021). We extended this work through a 6 year long MLE plus programme with support from VanLeer Foundation and entered into tribal schools with a stronger pedagogy informed by indigenous theories and knowledge of tribal communities and academic insights fromVygotsky and Chomsky. This pedagogy emphasized the use of everyday (multi)language practices of children and their rich oral resources and created pedagogically mediated opportunities for children to trans-knowledge freely and reflexively. Both Erai Erai and MLE plus teaching learning resources created new pedagogic encounters between children, textbooks, and the community in ways that were not earlier imagined. This paper discusses how the series of workshops that led to the development of these teaching learning resources involved deliberate practices of equal collaboration between community members, teachers and the academic experts from different disciplines like psychology, linguistics, education, folklore and art. Some experts did not know Saora, the community language, some didn't know both Odia (the state language) and Saora and some knew only Saora. The sessions therefore involved use of at least four languages, Saora, Odia, Hindi and English, multiple inter-lingual translations, language mixing and rich intersubjective encounters among the participants (Panda, 2022). The team together addressed the differences and anxieties that arose from the use of multilingual speech forms in a linguistically hierarchised community and classroom spaces. Interestingly, these tensions and differences were pedagogically exploited to translate ordinary conversations and community knowledge into beautiful dialogical texts that made Erai Erai and several community books like "My village, my story" and forty early readers for Saora children (developed under the MLE plus programme). These resources worked as sources of pedagogic inspiration for the future projects in Odisha (Panda et.al. 2013, Panda, 2022). This paper discusses how these teaching learning materials accommodated tensions

voiced around whose story and local version of Saora language to be included, who will be the authors of these books, how to use these knowledge as foundation for learning more abstract academic concepts in the schools, what would be the pedagogy for language and other content areas and how to develop a robust multilingual paradigm that don't objectify and commodify tribal languages. We deliberated on how to dismantle hierarchy among language speakers, communities and knowledge through our new found pedagogic spaces and make education a fundamental space for collaborative social and intellectual growth among all living in remote tribal areas. We worked with the belief that deep pedagogical principles employed to develop teaching learning resources in tribal (multi-) languages will help in revitalizing these communities and their linguistic, affective and cultural resources. I end this paper with a reflection on how these projects defined the scope of our Multilingual Education Resource Consortium (NMRC) and helped me personally conceptualise a different theory of human intelligence which I call "Multilingual Intelligence" (Panda, 2022), argue for the centrality of intersubjective resources in designing robust MLE programmes for tribal children and ways to support these MLE programmes that counter the process of epistemic injustice and provide opportunities to not only learn in a familiar language(s) but also make epistemic contributions, a capacity central to human value (Kerfoot, 2022; Panda, In Press).

About the Author

Professor Minati Panda is the former chairperson of the Zakir Husain Centre for Educational Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University and she is currently the Director of the National Multilingual Education Resource Consortium (NMRC), JNU. She has been a recipient of both the Fulbright and Commonwealth awards. She was the director of the prestigious JNU-University of Cambridge programme on multilingualism and multiliteracy. She has published extensively in the areas of culture and everyday cognition, multilingual education, language, etc. She was the advisor to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and the Government of Sri Lanka for multilingual education. Professor Panda was a visiting scholar at Teachers College, Columbia University, Manchester University, University of California San Diego (UCSD), Heidelberg University, Hamburg University, University of Western Ontario, the University of Cambridge and the University of South Australia.

Theme III

Revitalization of Endangered Languages: New Technologies and New Media

Toda Dance

Toda dance involves both men and women in circular formations. Their oral tradition, notably their songs, is rich (Emeneau, 1971), with folk songs sung by both genders. While the Toda do not possess exclusive music, they have distinctive folk dances.

Tribes and Tribal Languages of Tamil Nadu: How do Science and Technology help them survive?

Prof. Rajesh Kumar

Language is the most sophisticated product of the human mind. It is a living entity in society. As a social construct language is dynamic in nature; it changes on syntagmatic and paradigmatic axioms both. The strength and usage of language depend on the number of speakers too. Some languages are spoken by millions of speakers whereas some others have as low as a few hundred or even less. Most of the time less dominant languages in our societies are languages spoken by smaller social groups or 'tribes'. In the process of shift, a large number of speakers of these languages shift to other languages causing nature extinction at times. This takes us to the process of maintenance and preservation of languages.

Some of the tribes of Tamil Nadu and the names of their languages are the following: Adiyan/Adiyar, Aranadan, Badaga, Betta Kurumba, Eravallan, Irula, Kadar, Kani, Kanikkar, Kaniyan, Konda Kapu, Kora, Korava, Kota, Kudiya, Lambani (IA), Maha Malasar, Malasar, Mannan, Muduvan, Pal Kurumba, Palliyan, Paniyan, Sholagar, Ten Kurumba / Kattunayakan, Toda, Urali. Other than Lambani, rest of the them are from the Dravidian family of languages.

These names require careful examination as a single community may have more than one name and different scholars might have described them by different names. Government records may list these names differently as well. However, there is no disagreement on the fact that the preservation and maintenance of these speech communities and languages require a scientific approach and scientifically grounded technological support. Recent approaches in MT (Machine Translations), Intelligent Machine Design (ML), and mathematical models of AI demonstrate capabilities to help preserve and protect.

About the Author

Rajesh Kumar is a professor of linguistics in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Madras, Chennai. He obtained his PhD in linguistics from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Prior to joining IIT Madras, he taught at IIT Kanpur and IIT Patna in India and at the University of Texas at Austin in the USA. He has been a visiting faculty at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai in India. His book on Syntax of Negation and Licensing of Negative Polarity Items was published by Routledge in their prestigious series Outstanding Dissertations in Linguistics in 2006. He has been associate editor of the journal Language and Language Teaching.

Paniya Musical Instrument 'Cheena' and 'Kuyal'

Paniyan cherish their oral traditions, predominantly comprising folk songs. They use significant musical instruments like the 'Thudi' (drum), 'Cheena' and 'Kuyal' (wind instrument). Known for their fondness for storytelling, dance, music, and acting, Paniyan have a rich narrative tradition.

Revitalizing Endangered Tribal Languages Using the Recent Developments in Information Technology

Prof A R D Prasad

Revitalizing endangered tribal languages is a critical task for preserving cultural diversity and heritage in general, tribal languages in particular. Information technology (IT) could be a game changer. This presentation begins with an overview of currently accessible selective language archives to draw best lessons to build a similar archive for endangered tribal languages -- ELAR: Endangered Language Archive; PARADISEC: Pacific & Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures; The Language Archive: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Netherlands; DELAMAN: Digital Endangered Languages and Musics Archives Network; Virtual Language Observatory: By CLARIN which is network of more than 20 centres dealing with languages; SPPEL: Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Language of India.

The importance of Open Access to Information, Open Source software, Open Standards and Open Educational Resources is emphasised to support the cause of revitalising endangered tribal languages. The most desirable features of various collaborative platforms and applications are discussed. The presentation illustrates various open platforms and applications and describes the features they offer in building platforms for endangered triabal languages.

Information technology and tools can be harnessed at the various stages of building open archives for tribal languages -- Acquisition of resources & components of the Language; Digital storage and archiving technologies; Language learning apps and platforms; Artificial Intelligence (AI) for language analysis and translation; Social media for cultural and language revitalization. Various tools and their purpose and features are presented. A partial list includes: Wiktionary, Lingua Libre, AiKuma, Google Crowd source; Memrise, Duolingo, Flex, PolyGlot etc. These tools have overlapping features. At the time of implementation a careful evaluation is required to make a final choice that suits the purpose at hand.

Governments can leverage IT for creating language preservation mandates, ensuring funding and policy support for tech-based language revitalization efforts. Non-profit and global organizations can collaborate with tech companies to develop specific tools aimed at preserving these languages. By leveraging IT advancements, endangered tribal languages can be revitalized and preserved for future generations. These technologies not only facilitate documentation and learning but also empower native speakers and communities to take control of their linguistic heritage.

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About the Author

Prof. A.R.D. Prasad is former Professor and Head, Documentation Research and Training Centre (DRTC), at Indian Statistical Institute, Bangalore. He was a Member of DSpace Governance Advisory Board, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), USA. He conducted more than 50 training workshops in India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tunisia on behalf of UNESCO and in Samoa, Malaysia for Common Wealth of Learning on digital documentation. He was Consultant to UNESCO, Paris and UN-FAO, Rome. Dr. Prasad was a Fulbright Scholar and a member, High Level Committee, National Mission for Libraries, Govt. of India and member, Project Evaluation committee on E-Infrastructure, European Commission, Brussels.

Paniya Tribe Ornaments

Paniya women wear ornaments of palm leaves (ola and lolok for the ears, mookuthi for the nose). Both men and women tattooed on their bodies. They use "Marathikku" bark and also use "Mayana kosu Pisin" to stick Choothumani in earrings.

UNESCO framework for safeguarding languages

Mr. Anand Kanitkar

The preservation and promotion of tribal cultural heritage in Tamil Nadu require innovative approaches to revitalizing endangered languages. Language is a vital carrier of culture, encapsulating the history, traditions, and beliefs of tribal communities. It is through language that cultural narratives are passed down, fostering a sense of identity and belonging among community members.

To cultivate renewed interest in endangered tribal languages, communities can create engaging content such as interactive storytelling, digital dictionaries, and educational resources. Utilizing digital platforms, mobile applications, and social media will enhance its accessibility and engagement among younger generations.

UNESCO has developed several standard-setting instruments that can be effectively employed in initiatives aimed at revitalizing endangered languages and preserving tribal cultures. By leveraging these instruments, stakeholders can develop comprehensive strategies that not only focus on language preservation but also incorporate community participation and respect for intellectual property rights related to indigenous knowledge.

UNESCO's framework promotes an inclusive approach that empowers tribal communities to take charge of their cultural heritage while ensuring sustainability for future generations. As part of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL 2022-2032), this multifaceted approach will aim not only to preserve linguistic heritage but also to empower tribal communities by reinforcing their identity and cultural pride.

About the Author

Mr. Anand Kanitkar working as a Programme Officer for Culture at the UNESCO South Asia Regional Office in New Delhi. He has obtained Master of Arts in Indology and dual master's degrees in the 'Management of Cultural Landscapes' from European universities in France, Germany, and Italy. With over two decades of experience in cultural and heritage management, he has worked at various cultural institutions including the World Heritage Centre in Paris, UNESCO New Delhi, and UNESCO Kabul where he has managed heritage management projects in Bamiyan and Herat. Along with btuilt heritage, he has also worked in the field of living heritage by conducting training workshops, documentation and managing projects for creation of livelihood for Afghan Women Artisans in Afghanistan. In addition to his project work, Mr. Kanitkar has taught heritage management and UNESCO culture conventions at various universities in India.

Kani Dance

A group of people living in Tamil Nadu, India, known as the Kani tribes have a tight bond with the hills and forests of the Western Ghats. Originally a nomadic group, the Kani tribes are now an established society.

The culture of the Kani tribes is a reflection of their intimate bond with the hills and forests. They coexist with nature and feel a connection to the mountains and forests. Herbal medications are used in the traditional medicinal practices of the Kani tribes. As a rural offering, the Tamil Nadu-based Kaani tribal community performs a group dance known as Kaanikkar Nritham.

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The New Indian Express

Theme IV

Documenting and Archiving Endangered Tribal Languages

Maha Malasar Tribe

In Tamil Nadu, India, the Maha Malasar tribe is a Scheduled Tribe that inhabits the forests of the Palaghat and Coimbatore districts. They are primarily found in Sungam, Thekkadi, and the Parambikulam and surrounding forests.

They employ a combination of Malayalam and Tamil in addition to their own dialect. They have a primitive material culture and an oral tradition of folk music.

Preparation of Instructional materials in endangered languages and teaching and learning strategies

Prof. Ramesh Gaur

Language and scripts are part of our cultural heritage, which gives us abundant knowledge of a particular era. Languages should be preserved so that our cultural diversity will remain a treasurer for youths. When a language or Script dies, the knowledge and ability to understand the culture of an era is threatened because the teachings, customs, traditions, and other inherited knowledge are no longer transmitted among native speakers. If a language or Script dies, we cannot read manuscripts, inscriptions, coins, etc, of a particular era. In a census survey of India in 1961, about 1652 languages / Dialects were recorded as Mother Tongues. The same has been reduced to 1369 in the Census Survey of India 2011. What happened to 283 languages over a period of about 50 years? A language or a dialect remains alive until a community speaks it or it is continually endangered or in fear of extinction. We may not be able to keep all the languages and dialects alive, but at least we can preserve them for posterity through Language Documentation and Digital Archiving.

There are several ways to preserve languages, such as developing OCR by promoting it through the internet and multimedia, encouraging the younger generation to teach and learn their languages, organizing workshops and seminars, conducting short-term certificate and diploma courses, etc. Tamilnadu is believed to have approximately 20 Spoken / Written languages and about 37 Tribal Communities. Language documentation is one of the essential ways to preserve languages and scripts." In the current situation, it is challenging to keep all languages alive. However, it is essential to document and digitally Archive these languages. So, in the future, someone can learn these languages using documented language resources.

The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) aims to document and digitally archive the tribal languages of Tamil Nadu, India. The proposed project may span 21-24 months and be divided into three main phases: preparation and pilot survey, primary fieldwork, and archiving and dissemination.

In the first phase, lasting three months, the project team will identify major Tribal Languages in Nadu through a literature review and expert consultation. A pilot survey will then be conducted with 2-3 representative tribes to test and refine data collection methods. The second phase, the project's core, will last 12-15 months. It involves extensive fieldwork with each identified tribe, typically spending 1-2 months per community. Researchers will collect audio and video recordings of natural speech, conduct linguistic elicitation sessions, and gather sociolinguistic data. This phase also includes 4-5 months per tribe for data analysis and processing, followed by a 1-month follow-up fieldwork period to fill any gaps in the data. The final phase, lasting six months, focuses on organizing the collected data, developing a micro-website to serve as a digital archive, and uploading all materials with appropriate access controls.

Throughout the project, there is a strong emphasis on ethical considerations and community involvement. Strategies include obtaining informed consent, respecting community protocols, providing fair compensation to language consultants, and training local community members in documentation techniques. The project aims to create comprehensive documentation and digital archiving of Tamil Nadu's tribal languages, including a rich corpus of annotated linguistic data for each documented language. The resulting digital archive will be valuable for language preservation and linguistic research.

Potential challenges are acknowledged, such as accessing remote communities, managing large amounts of data, and ensuring long-term community access to archived materials. The project plan includes strategies to mitigate these challenges. This initiative represents a significant step towards preserving India's linguistic diversity and contributes to the broader field of language documentation. By involving local communities throughout the process, the project also aims to build capacity for ongoing language preservation efforts within these communities.

Professor Ramesh C. Gaur is presently working as Dean (Administration), Director & Head- Kala Nidhi Division at Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi, Ministry of Culture, Government of India. He is a Fulbright Scholar and is the first Indian nominated as Member- International Advisory Committee (IAC) UNESCO Memory of the World (MoW) Programme (2018-2025) as well as Member UNESCO Global Task Force on Indigenous Languages (2020-2032). Prof. Gaur has also served as member of Expert Consultation Committee for setting up of International Centre on Documentary Heritage (ICDH) in South Korea and Consultative Committee on Digital Dunhuang, China. He was also the First Indian appointed as Chair International Federations of Library Associations (IFLA) Advisory Committee on Cultural Heritage for period 2021-2024. Prof. Gaur has been appointed by Ministry of Culture, GOI as Officer on special Duty (OSD) for setting up of Indian Institute of Heritage.

Kurumba Painting

Mullu Kurumbar Dance

'The Wayanad District of Kerala and the Gudalur Taluk of Tamil Nadu are home to the Mullu Kurumba tribe. They speak Kurumaba, a dialect that combines Malayalam, Tamil, and Kannada. Four kulams, or clans, among the Mullu Kurumba control marriage alliances.

The Kurumbar Nritham and Vattakali are two of the many dances performed by the Mullu Kuruman, a tribal community. Both before and after wedding ceremonies, this dance has been performed.

Documenting and Archiving Tribal Languages and Folklore in Tamil Nadu: A Policy Paper with Action Plans

Dr. M. D. Muthukumaraswamy

The preservation and promotion of tribal cultural heritage, particularly the documentation and archiving of languages and folklore, is of paramount importance in safeguarding the rich heritage of Tamil Nadu's indigenous communities. This policy paper explores the critical need for comprehensive documentation and archiving initiatives, drawing insights from the National Folklore Support Centre's (NFSC) work with the Narikuṟavar (Vagri) community. The paper proposes a multi-pronged approach that combines community engagement, technological innovation, and policy advocacy to ensure the survival and revitalisation of tribal languages and folklore in Tamil Nadu.

The Imperative of Documentation and Archiving:

Tribal languages and folklore are repositories of invaluable cultural knowledge, embodying the unique histories, world views, and artistic expressions of indigenous communities. However, these intangible treasures face numerous threats, including language shift, cultural assimilation, and the erosion of traditional practices. The urgency of documentation and archiving efforts is underscored by the rapid disappearance of these cultural resources, which represent an irreplaceable loss for both the communities themselves and the broader cultural landscape of Tamil Nadu.

Lessons from National Folklore Support Centre's Narikuṟavar (Vagri) Community Archive Project:

The NFSC's work with the Narikuravar community provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with documenting and archiving tribal languages and folklore. The project's emphasis on community participation, capacity building, and the use of digital technologies offers a model for future initiatives. The creation of a Vagri dictionary and descriptive grammar, sourced from the documentation of oral histories, songs, and material culture, demonstrates the transformative potential of community-led archiving efforts.

Key Policy Recommendations and Action Plans:

Establish a dedicated Tribal Languages and Folklore Archive:

The creation of a centralised archive, equipped with state-of-the-art technology and staffed by trained professionals, would provide a secure repository for the documentation and preservation of tribal languages and folklore. This archive would serve as a vital resource for researchers, educators, and community members, facilitating access to and dissemination of these cultural treasures.

Empower Community-Led Documentation Initiatives:

Recognising the importance of community ownership and agency, the policy advocates for the empowerment of tribal communities to undertake their own documentation and archiving projects. This would involve providing training, resources, and financial support to enable communities to document their languages, folklore, and cultural practices in ways that are meaningful and relevant to them.

Integrate Technology into Documentation and Archiving:
The use of digital technologies, such as audio and video recording, photography, and online databases, can significantly enhance the efficiency and accessibility of documentation and archiving efforts. The policy recommends investing in technological infrastructure and training to ensure that tribal communities have the tools and skills necessary to leverage these technologies effectively.

Incorporate Tribal Languages and Folklore into Education:
The inclusion of tribal languages and folklore in school curricula would not only promote cultural awareness and understanding but also contribute to the revitalisation of these endangered cultural resources. The policy proposes the development of culturally relevant educational materials and the training of teachers to facilitate the integration of tribal languages and folklore into the classroom.

Foster Collaboration and Networking:
Collaboration between government agencies, academic institutions, NGOs, and tribal communities is essential for the success of documentation and archiving initiatives. The policy emphasises the importance of creating platforms for dialogue, knowledge sharing, and resource mobilisation to ensure a coordinated and sustainable approach to preserving tribal cultural heritage.

Develop a Comprehensive Language Policy:
A comprehensive language policy that recognises the value and importance of tribal languages is crucial for their preservation and promotion. The policy recommends measures to support the use of tribal languages in education, administration, and public domains, as well as initiatives to promote language learning and revitalisation. Further it is important to recognise the tribal languages as the etymological sources for the classical Tamil language.

The documentation and archiving of tribal languages and folklore are vital for the preservation and promotion of Tamil Nadu's rich cultural heritage. By implementing the policy recommendations and action plans outlined in this paper, we can ensure that the voices, stories, and traditions of Tamil Nadu's indigenous communities are not only preserved but also celebrated and shared for generations to come. This will contribute to a more inclusive and culturally vibrant society that recognises and values the contributions of its diverse communities

About the Author
Dr. M.D. Muthukumaraswamy has been serving as the Director of the National Folklore Support Centre, Chennai since its establishment in 1997. As the Director of NFSC he led the prestigious folklore projects such as documentation of oral epics of India, visual art traditions of India, establishment of community archives for indigenous communities and Fellowships in folklore. The projects were funded by the Ford Foundation and the Tata Trusts. The centre successfully completed a community archive project for Narikuṟavar(Vagri). He has lectured at numerous universities in India and abroad and holds senior visiting professorships at the University of Würzburg, Germany, and the University of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Kadar Tribe

In the Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala, the Kadar are a recognized Scheduled Tribe. They are an indigenous tribal tribe. Their traditional way of existence has been centered around hunting and gathering. They are an aboriginal group. Over time, they have relocated from their previous residence in the Western Ghats' Annamalai Hills to new places. The Kadar people are renowned for their bamboo-made combs.
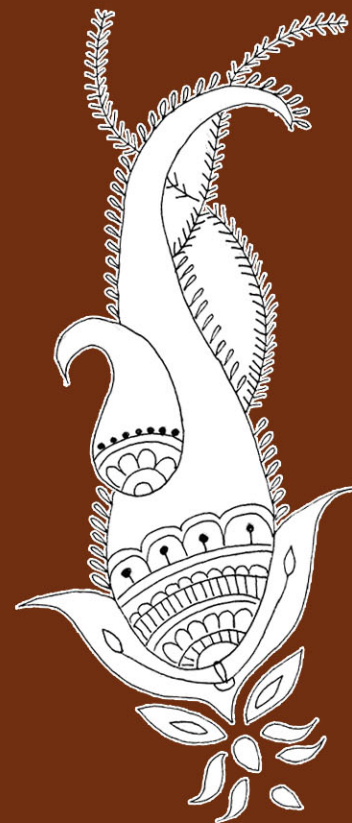
Traditionally, Kadar males would prepare a comb and present it to their future spouse either prior to or following their marriage.

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Kurumba Paddle

Toda embroidary design
"Pugur Style" - Flower design

Community-Led Documentation: A Tool for Tribal Heritage Preservation

Dr. Nerupama Y. Modwel

Tamil Nadu is home to diverse tribal communities who possess a treasure trove of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in the form of distinct socio-cultural practices, languages, oral narratives, festivals, rituals, and traditional wisdom related to nature and medicine. The economic livelihoods of many of them are based on know-how reflecting their deep connections with their environment–on skills associated with agricultural practices, forest resources, and crafts. As language is a key vehicle for transmitting oral traditions, the loss of tribal languages threatens the survival of their traditional knowledge. Cultural displacement and economic pressures have further contributed to an erosion of tribal culture.

There is a need to ensure that tribal communities can preserve and pass on their unique cultural heritage and special knowledge while also supporting their socio-economic development by addressing their specific needs. This requires a comprehensive approach that involves research, community participation, and support from the government and other institutions. A key first step to this is recording and documenting their cultural practices and languages. Community-driven initiatives are essential, as they empower tribal communities to take ownership of preserving their cultural heritage. Local communities should be involved in decision-making, documentation, and cultural education programmes.

This presentation focuses on how self-documentation programmes and the creation of an ongoing digital archive can help preserve cultural heritage. Such programmes aim to preserve and revive tribal languages through community-led efforts. Fieldwork, in partnership with the tribal communities, will document and transcribe spoken languages to create a digital archive that includes dictionaries, glossaries, grammar books, and a rich collection of associated cultural elements like folklore, performance traditions, arts, crafts, and cuisine. These materials will be stored in an ongoing central archive accessible to scholars, community members, and policymakers. The project/programme will work with universities, linguists, and cultural experts to ensure the documentation is complete and accurate.

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About the Author

Nerupama Y. Modwel is Principal Director, Intangible Cultural Heritage Division at the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH). She has overseen the successful completion of a number of research, documentation and workshop projects on performing traditions, indigenous arts, folklore, oral narratives and histories, culinary heritage, as well as extensive cultural mapping along the Ganga River in UP and Bihar, and documentation of the living culture of heritage cities like Varanasi, Gaya and Prayagraj. She is coordinating an ongoing programme of studies on tribal communities across the country. Previously, Nerupama taught at the University of Delhi and Rajasthan University.

Toda House

Munds are the little hamlet where the Todas reside. The round, pent-shaped Toda huts, often known as dogles, have sliding doors. This sliding door is mounted within the hut and is positioned so that it can be readily moved back and forth on two sturdy poles. Dogles, as these huts are called, are typically 18 feet (5.5 m) long, 9 feet (2.7 m) broad, and 10 feet (3.0 m) high. They are thatched and constructed of bamboo that has been secured with rattan. The hut's fundamental bent shape is created by the arching thicker bamboo canes. Over this frame, thinner bamboo canes, or rattan, are knotted closely together and parallel to one another. Over this is layered dried grass thatch.

Theme V

Scheme of Preservation and Promotion of Tribal Languages

Paniya Tribe

Language Rights & the Issues of Tribal Education

Dr. Sujoy Sarkar

Language rights for tribal children are enshrined in the Constitution of India. However, the gap between the home and school languages remains a significant concern for tribal education. This paper highlights structural gaps in tribal education and low educational achievement among tribal children. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in West Bengal and secondary data from Tamil Nadu, it argues that the lack of mother tongue as a medium of instruction and denial of linguistic rights are significant contributors to poor literacy outcomes and overall educational challenges faced by tribal communities.

Tamil Nadu reported a population of 7.95 lakhs in the 2011 Census, 1.1 per cent of the state's total population. In Tamil Nadu, 37 communities are listed as scheduled tribes. The commitment of the Tamil Nadu Government to the development of the tribal communities is commendable. For the upliftment of tribal communities, focusing on children's education is essential. While Adi Dravidar primary schools across Tamil Nadu have contributed to this effort, the medium of instruction remains a crucial challenge. Although the Constitution safeguards mother tongue education, and the Right to Education Act of 2009 advocates for quality education, a critical question persists: can quality education be achieved without instruction in the mother tongue? UN SDG Goal 4 emphasises inclusive, equitable education and lifelong learning, aligning with UNESCO's International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL 2022-2032), which raises awareness of language preservation and revitalisation. This talk draws attention to the vital role of schools in preserving indigenous languages, promoting linguistic diversity, and revitalising endangered languages. Integrating these goals into school education empowers future generations to value and celebrate linguistic diversity, positioning schools as critical agents in the mission of language preservation and promotion. Schools can be the first place for language preservation and promotion.

Linguists believe that around 35 tribal mother tongues are spoken in Tamil Nadu. Providing mother tongue education for all the tribal communities may be difficult as some are scattered across the states. However, giving mother tongue education in the ten areas covering the 7 Districts, where the Tribal population is 50% or more, may be possible. In these areas, the state already implemented Integrated Tribal Development Programme (ITDP) projects. The Tribal Welfare Department launched a scheme to support NGOs opening schools in interior tribal areas on 02.01.2019. However, in these schemes, the child's linguistic rights are not paid and require adequate attention. Additionally, no special provision exists to recruit local tribal teachers, exacerbating the teaching-learning problems. As a result, language gaps between teachers and students persist.

The Tribal Welfare Department Report 2019-2020 states that there are 314 Government Tribal Residential Schools, including 8 Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) and 1134 Adi Dravidar Welfare Schools under the Adi Dravidar and Tribal Welfare Department. Additionally, 40 schools operate under the Forest Department, and over 50,000 general schools under the School Education Department provide education to students from tribal communities across the state. However, the lack of policy addressing the medium of instruction—along with the omission of language issues as a challenge for tribal communities - contradicts Tamil Nadu's otherwise inclusive policies. This absence has hindered the welfare of tribal communities and denied them their linguistic rights. This lack of focus on language has hindered the welfare of tribal communities and denied them their linguistic rights despite special attention being paid to school education.

This paper invites the state's attention to address the denial of linguistic rights to tribal children, particularly in primary schools. It emphasises the need to empower tribal communities by bridging the language gap in education. By focusing on integrating mother tongue instruction in school, the paper aims to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable education system for tribal populations that aligns with constitutional provisions and international goals for quality education.

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About the Author

Sujoy Sarkar is a Lecturer and Junior Research Officer at the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) in Mysuru. Since March 2016, he has also served as the Officer-in-Charge of the Scheme for Protection & Preservation of Endangered Languages at CIIL. Sujoy completed his MPhil focusing on the medium of instruction in primary education for the Toto tribe. He defended his doctoral dissertation on "Linguistic Human Rights and Language Discrimination: A Critical Study of Language in Education Policy for Tribal Education in India." His research interests encompass various aspects of language education, including: Language Issues in Primary Education for Tribal Areas, Language Policy and Planning, Linguistic Human Rights, Language Endangerment and Revitalization.

Mullu Kurumba Tribe

'Paniyan' is derived from 'Panikar,' signifying 'labourer.' They inhabit 174 villages across Gudalur and Pandalur taluks. Historically, they were subjected to servitude and worked as labourers for affluent landowners. They relied on grain and clothing provided to them by their masters as wages. Known for their hard work, they excel in arduous agricultural tasks within marshy valley habitats.

Paliyar Dance

The Paliya tribe in Tamil Nadu is known for its traditional art style, Paliya Nritham. The Paliya tribes consider "Ezhamathu Palichi" to be their ancestral god, although Mariyamma is their real goddess.

During the festivals at the Mariyamma temple, a performance art form known as Paliya Nritham or Paliya Koothu is presented. Performers dress in vibrant gowns fashioned from natural materials, such as soap bark from Acacia intsia (L.) Willd. (Mathew Angala, Mathew Anto and Mathew Babuji, 2018)

Safeguarding Adivasi Cultural Heritage in Tamil Nadu- Some Sociological Points of Caution and Action for Policy Making

Dr. Siddhartha Krishnan

As signatory to the UN Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), India is committed to design related policies. The Tamil Nadu Government, in its 2024 Budget, allocated INR 1000 crores to improve Tribal standards of living. The Government will use portions of this allocation to action the UN commitment. This conference is a platform to launch a policy framework to safeguard intangible cultural heritage of Tamil Nadu's tribes.

In my paper, and the presentation stemming from it, I make actionable analytical and ethical points on Adivasi culture and heritage pertinent to policy making. And these points overlap.

The analytical point draws upon my interdisciplinary research in environmental social sciences and environmental humanities. My two-decade long collaborations with ecologists, wildlife biologists and environmental scientists around conservation issues in the Eastern Himalayas and Western Ghats have ensured that I sense a potential interdisciplinary collaboration when I see one. For our purposes, I notice that linguists and conservationists work in silos despite the intersecting reality of linguistic - diversity and biodiversity, and their decline through the 20th century. Biodiverse habitats provide the material context for local cultures, and its linguistic legacies. In fact, conservation scholars have done more work on traditional ecological knowledge than linguists. This interdisciplinary research collaboration, which renders problematic any hard separation of the 'tangible' and 'intangible,' must find encouragement and funding under the Tholkudi scheme. Climate and land use change pose both conservation and communication threats in localities.

Second, a related and ethical point with policy relevance. The UNESCO Convention has operational guidelines for safeguarding cultural heritage. These include among other aspects- communities having the primary role in safeguarding their intangible cultural heritage; all interactions with them to maintain and transmit intangible cultural heritage be characterized by transparent collaboration, consultation, and prior informed consent; and ensuring access of communities to, besides, objects and artefacts, natural spaces and places of memory, necessary for expressing the intangible cultural heritage. These are typically forest and pastoral spaces that come under Forest and Wildlife Department control. The Government can consider existing laws including the Forest Rights Act (2006) in safeguarding cultural heritage like spoken and sung language. Further, the best practice to ensure state sponsored research and action onintangible tribal heritage is to constitute an Institutional Review Board (IRB) composed of academic and policy experts.

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About the Author

Dr. Siddhartha Krishnan is a senior faculty at Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE). He was Carson Fellow (2012-13), Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC), Ludwig- Maximilians University, Munich. He is an environmental sociologist by training, and an environmental historian by interdisciplinary interest. He combines field and archival work for his research in the Western Ghats and eastern Himalayas. Pastoral landscapes, agrarian transformation, environmental justice, human well-being in conservation landscapes, and human-wildlife interactions are research and policy themes he has pursued.

Kota Tribal Dance

The week-long Aiyanoor Ammanoor festival is celebrated by the Kota tribe in the Nilgiris. The illustration explicit their "particular dressing' for the celebration.

Documenting the Oral Traditions and Unique Cultural Practices of the Scheduled Tribes in Tamil Nadu: An Outline

Dr. C. Sathyanarayanan

As signatory to the UN Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage An understanding of the term tribe seems very much essential before we proceed. It is basically an anthropological or a sociological construct. In the popular sense, it denotes a group of people tied up with each other through kinship who share common cultural characteristics, language and territory. In different parts of India, the tribal people are known as, adivasi, janajati, girijan, vanvasi, vanyajati, adimjati and so on. As such, no definition exists for the term tribe in the Constitution of India. Only those communities who find place in the list of Scheduled Tribes by a Presidential Order are considered as tribal people or tribal communities for all practical purposes. The tribal population of the country, as per 2011 census, is 10.43 crore, constituting 8.6% of the total population. The number of individual ethnic groups notified as Scheduled Tribes is 705.

In Tamil Nadu, as per the 2011 Census, 36 communities have been enlisted as Scheduled Tribes with a population of 7,94,697 constituting about 1% of the total population of the State. The Narikoravan alias Kurivikkaran, recently included as the 37th ST community of Tamil Nadu have a population of around 50,000 people. There are three popular tribal (cultural) landscapes in Tamil Nadu where the tribal communities are reported to be living predominantly in uni-ethnic settlements or hamlets.

These are,

(1) Eastern Ghats and its adjoining plains covering northern and central Tamil Nadu where the (Eastern Ghats) Irular and Malayali tribal communities predominantly live with an approximate population of 5 lakh people comprising 65% of the total tribal population of the State; Malayalis are around 3.5 lakhs and Irulars are around 1.6 lakh people, as per the 2011 Census

(2) Western Ghats and its extensions covering the Nilgiris where the Toda, Kota, Irular, Kattunayakan, Paniyan and Kurumbas (which includes Alu Kurumba, Betta Kurumba and Mullu Kurumba sub-groups) live with an approximate total population of about 35,000 people; Anamalai hill ranges where the Malasar, Maha Malasar, Eravallan, Muduvan and Kadar communities live with a population of around 6000 people; Siruvani hill ranges mainly within the Coimbatore district where the Irular of the Western Ghats live with a population of around 30,000 people and

(3) Varusanad – Kodaikanal hill ranges where the Paliyans live with a population of around 9,000 people. Apart from these, in the Agastyamalai, we see the presence of the Kanikaran tribal community with a population of about 4000 people; and the Soliga tribe in the Satyamangalam hill ranges with a population of around 19,000 people. With regard to certain entries in the ST list of Tamil Nadu State, like, the Adiyan, Aranadan, Kammara, Kochu Velan, Konda Kapus, Koraga, Kudiya, Malai Arayan, Malai Pandaram, Malayekandi, Mannan, etc we only find them got enumerated in the Census

of India records but their presence as 'communities living in Tamil Nadu' has not been registered in any earlier ethnographic compilation. As such, they do not seem to live anywhere within Tamil Nadu as communities. Only self-claims of individuals are observed from the Census of India records. Similarly, it is understood that there are issues for certain tribal identities such as, Kattunayakan living in places other than Nilgiris district; Kurumans, Kurichchan, MalaKkuravan, Malai Vedan etc in various parts of Tamil Nadu. Therefore, it is suggested that, language or cultural documentation on these communities could be deferred for now to save the resources.

Out of the 37 Scheduled Tribes in the Tamil Nadu State, six tribal communities have been identified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) and they all live primarily in the Nilgiris district; these are the Toda, Kota, Kurumbas, Irular, Paniyan and Kattunayakan. Except the Kurumbas, other five PVTGs do not have any subgroups. The different Kurumba groups of the Nilgiris district are, 1. Alu Kurumba, also known as Paal Kurumba or Paalu Kurumbar, 2. Betta Kuru(m)ba also known as Urali Kurumba or Urali Kuruman and 3. Mullu Kurumba also known as Kuruman or Mullu Kuruman. The Kattunayakan tribal community which lives only in the Gudalur and Pandalur taluks of Nilgiris district are known as Jenu Kuru(m)ba in the adjoining Chamaraja and Mysore districts of Karnataka. Till today, the Government departments and the local administration in Nilgiris district, consider the Kurumbas as a single entity (subsuming all the abovesaid three subtribes) for all the practical purposes. Therefore, separate population figures are not available on the distinct subtribes of the Kurumba tribal cluster of the Nilgiris district in the Census of India records. However, this gap has been filled up by the socio-economic survey data published by the Tribal Research Centre in 2011. Except the Mullu Kurumba, the other three Kurumba subtribes speak a dialect of Kannada. The Mullu Kurumba speak a dialect of Malayalam and largely imitate the customs and practices of the Kerala communities.

Using the particulars furnished above and keeping the 'tribal cultural landscapes' as the basic framework, we may take up documentation activities among the actually existing tribal communities of Tamil Nadu. Creation of Tribal Cultural Resource Centres at the hamlet or cluster (of hamlets) level for preserving and celebrating their cultural heritage could be taken up on a collaborative basis, with a participatory approach, keeping the respective communities as stake holders. What to document, where to document and when to document (mostly on the annual calendar basis) are to be planned in consultation with the concerned communities. In this process, we must include the component of protecting the linkages and rights of the tribal communities with their ecologies too. Our approach and aim should be that the rich language and cultural traditions of the tribal communities are rejuvenated to flourish and get celebrated in the very places of their origin by its creators.

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About the Author

Dr. C. R. Sathyanarayanan was former Joint Director, Anthropological Survey of India and on a short deputations served as Deputy Director in the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India and as Director of the Tribal Research Centre, Ooty, Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu. During service in Anthropological Survey of India, he conducted extensive field studies among the tribal communities in the Nilgiris –Wayanad areas and Anamalai hills of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. He was a Senior Consultant (Research) in the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, New Delhi in 2022 and a Senior Fellow of the ICSSR at the Department of Anthropology, University of Mysore, Mysuru.

Theme VI
Speech Community and Language Safeguarding Practices:
The Scheduled Tribes of Tamil Nadu

Kurumba Painting

Mr. L. Balasubramani extracts the plant juice for making the paint which is used to paint in kurumba art.

They use white boards , canvas and white clothes to draw painting. In artistic process ALU kurumbas use unique material "vengai tree milk" and colour palette is formed from natural sources like charchol and plant fluid.

Empowering Tribes: Preserving Language and Culture Through Self-Documentation

Dr. K. Vasamalli

In the name of development and welfare, tribal community members are often moved away from our traditional lives and lands to fit into the mainstream. While this can have some benefits, it has also, in many cases, forced us to abandon our oral cultural practices, which we deeply value. Efforts to preserve our language must focus on helping us maintain these practices.

Our oral traditions and written knowledge are like two sides of the same coin-losing one makes the other meaningless. If we only hold on to written knowledge and lose our oral practices, we lose a big part of our identity. When our oral traditions disappear, so does our traditional knowledge and close connection with nature. The loss of tribal knowledge is a loss for all of humanity. This is why efforts to promote our languages must go hand in hand with preserving the knowledge that comes from our lived experiences.

Unfortunately, our culture is often misrepresented. For example, in the Toda community, our sacred temples are mistakenly called dairies, our traditional rainbow-shaped houses are described as half-barrel vaults, and our unique cultural practice of men throwing heavy stones over their shoulders is falsely labeled as "Ilavatta Kal throwing," which is inaccurate and insulting. Many other communities face similar misrepresentations. To preserve our language and avoid these misunderstandings, we must support self-researchers and native linguists from our communities. Our stories, songs, and traditions should be documented by us, for us.

The core of my message at this conference aligns with the United Nations' "International Decade of Indigenous Languages" (2022-2032) and its principle of "nothing for us without us." Through this talk, I advocate for empowering tribal communities to take ownership of their linguistic heritage. This means supporting tribal self-researchers and community linguists in documenting their own languages, folklore, and cultural practices. Doing so ensures that tribal knowledge is transmitted accurately and respectfully to future generations.

Furthermore, language revitalization and documentation should not be isolated efforts. They must be integrated with broader initiatives that empower our communities and advance social justice. By combining these efforts, we can preserve our languages and cultures while also strengthening our communities as a whole.

About the Author

Vasamalli is an eminent Toda writer, poet, social activist, archivist and researcher. She has working on a Toda dictionary and her publication "Maarum Ulagil Maraiyaa Oligal: Thodar Vaaimozhi Ilakkiyathin Oru Thoguppu" is the most authentic as well as critically acclaimed work on the life, culture and literature of Toda community. She has been presenting Toda poetry in major literature festivals across the country. She is an Advisory Board Member, Centre for Oral and Tribal Literature, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi.

Alu Kurumba Dance

Toda Speech Community in the Early Twenty-First Century

Dr. Tarun Chhabra

The Todas are the oldest surviving inhabitants of the Upper Nilgiris Plateau of Tamil Nadu state in south India, having lived here for over 3500 years. This, together with their curious barrel-vaulted temples and houses, herds of ferocious long-horned endemic buffaloes, the men's flowing beards, the women's distinctive ringlets and both sexes' embroidered cloaks, has ensured the fame of this community ever since the Nilgiris were opened up to the outside world two centuries ago.

Of the Indigenous communities who have occupied the uplands, slopes and foothills of the Nilgiris from ancient times, Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas and Irulas, all speak (with rare exceptions) four separate mutually unintelligible languages.

Like their culture, awll(zh) vawzh as the Toda language is known, is also highly aberrant. Thus, although it is a south   Dravidian language (derived from a protolanguage), many people hearing Todas conversing are convinced of its non-Dravidian origin (due to its sound system). For example, most Dravidian languages have ten vowels; however, M.B. Emeneau has listed as many as sixteen vowels – low, mid and long, which is an unusually high number and this has been quoted by subsequent researchers. In my study (being perhaps the only non-Toda to have attained fluency at present), I discovered that Toda phonology has another important mid vowel with strong lip rounding: ō that is pronounced as in the English word hope, thus making it seventeen!

Endangered languages are those that are not being passed down to children as their mother tongue, or those that have been declining for a variety of reasons. Surprisingly, Toda has been listed by UNESCO as one of the Critically Endangered   languages of India! This is the final level of endangerment prior to extinction, and at this stage, the language will be spoken only by very few members of the oldest generation, who may themselves be semi-speakers. Today, almost all members of the orthodox Toda community (excluding the Christians), speak Toda as their mother tongue and first language learned. Therefore, this categorisation is flawed as the most important criterion for assessing a language, i.e., intergenerational transmission, is robust in the Toda case. Admittedly, the Toda language is already exhibiting the warning signs of simplification, reduction, modification and passive assimilation, and these need to be addressed urgently.

Within Sociolinguistics, networking is used to explain linguistic variations in terms of community norms; it concentrates on the relationships between speakers, and the linguistic changes in light of them. A study of Toda kinship terminology brings out some observations in this important context, as the usage of numerous such terms at an early age, could be used as indicators of linguistic changes and can be addressed to the community for redressal. I present two examples: the grandfather level relatives are commonly known as piin; they are informally addressed as piinaa or piaa; they are formally addressed

by a male relative as etyem piie, and formally addressed by a female relative as etyem piie followed by prostration in the uniquely Toda manner. Similarly, the grandmother level relatives are commonly known as piaf; they are informally addressed as piafa; they are formally addressed by a male relative as etyem piafe or echyeec; and formally addressed by female relatives as etyem piafe or echyeec followed by prostration.

Although such kinship rules are still observed among all categories of relatives, it is important to delve into whether all patriclans and matriclans continue to follow them scrupulously, as this forms one of the early important forms of intergenerational transmission. For instance, I have observed that the two younger generations often address grandfather level relatives informally as taatha (from Tamil) and have been striving to correct this. Also, from the second example above, the common manner of informal address to a grandmother level relative is echyeec; although this has become well entrenched for a long time, I was told by elders that this is relatively recent and perhaps has non-Toda origins. We need to have summer and winter camps for Toda school children in the presence of parents where such issues are discussed and the use of traditional terms revived, before such linguistic variants become the norm within a small, homogenous society.

It is well recognised that children acquire language and culture together as an integrated process. Even from a young age, for example, Toda boys assist in herding the sacred buffaloes at dairy-temples and thus need to be familiar with priestly language and terms, along with taboos, etc. At most dairy-temples of higher grade, the dairyman is required to only converse in Toda, and thus prohibited from communicating with outsiders. Proficiency in Toda has often enabled me to bridge this barrier and even be served the priestly fare that is cooked within these hallowed edifices, along with being invited to reside at seasonal hamlets where only traditional architecture is permitted and no non-Todas welcomed. This confirms that language is linked with identity as the knowledge of their language and culture has allowed them to identify me as a de-facto Toda. I recall a young priest (who is disallowed from wearing a watch) asking me in chaste Toda i.e.: pottehn ehzhkhy ('what is the time?'), when he might well have used a combined Toda-Tamil/English query during secular life. At many dairies, even the species used as firewood or to sweep the temple courtyard are specified; thus, a youngster should be exposed to facets of cultural life to gain knowledge of such linguistic terms. Similarly, when a boy assistant listens to the priest chanting the prayer, after penning-in the buffaloes, he become aware of many elements of his Sacred Geography that range from deity hills, waterbodies, rocks, pathways and the like. He also acquires familiarity with priestly language of prayer, the language of the oracle(s), language of greeting differing categories of kin, the metric language of their spontaneously composed songs, etc. Thus, all Toda males should be encouraged to participate in such cultural activities that are integral aspects of Linguistic Anthropology, which focuses on the relation between language, society and culture.

Similarly, within the female domain of embroidering, it is noticed that many of the traditional motifs that adorned the pekaadr pootkhull(zh)y (funerary cloak) are not used anymore – during preparation of a chapter on traditional dress and embroidery for my book, I had to struggle to find elders who could embroider some such old patterns. We thus need to hold embroidery workshops where the entire vocabulary of this ancient art form (now with a G.I. tag) is disseminated.

In Sociolinguistics, prestige is the level of regard accorded to a language within a Speech Community, relative to other languages. We need to identify myriad ways of assisting tribal people look at their mother tongues and culture with a greater sense of pride. Perhaps in India, unwritten languages have come have less prestige. It is for this reason that we need a script for Toda that would be based on a Tamil system, but with considerable adaptations to accommodate the   complex phonetic system of this language. Following multiple requests to translate my book – The Toda Landscape: Explorations in Cultural Ecology (Harvard Oriental Series vol.79) – into a Tamil-based orthography, we have initiated this process. Once a workable orthography has been generated, Toda literary works may be introduced in selected educational institutions and or more informally, in hamlet-based programmes conducted by Todas.

In the Toda context, we need to ensure that the current norm of bilingualism – Toda and Tamil (although youth are now learning English) – does not result in a stage when the dominant language completely takes over by assimilation. For this, a number of ideas are proposed: analyse the degree to which the Toda language is being dislocated in the early 21st Century, followed by specific Language Revitalisation programmes that include policy support, documentation, immersive learning workshops, school camps during vacations, community involvement, promoting extant language safeguarding practices, use of technology, organising annual Tribal Language Week workshops, honouring local tribal languages in local schools, starting community Radio Stations that focus on local Indigenous languages, creation of language hubs during early childhood education at hamlets, in addition to earlier mentioned points.

About the Author

Tarun Chhabra is the founder of the Toda Nalavaazhvu Sangam and the more recent Edhkwehlynawd Botanical Refuge (EBR) Centre Trust. He is engaged in conserving the traditional heritage of the indigenous Toda people. He has authored over eighty papers, book chapters and articles, that culminated in the magnum opus, The Toda Landscape: Explorations in Cultural Ecology (Harvard University Press; Harvard Oriental Series, vol 79) in 2015. He is a member of the IUCN-SSC Western Ghats Plant Specialists Group.
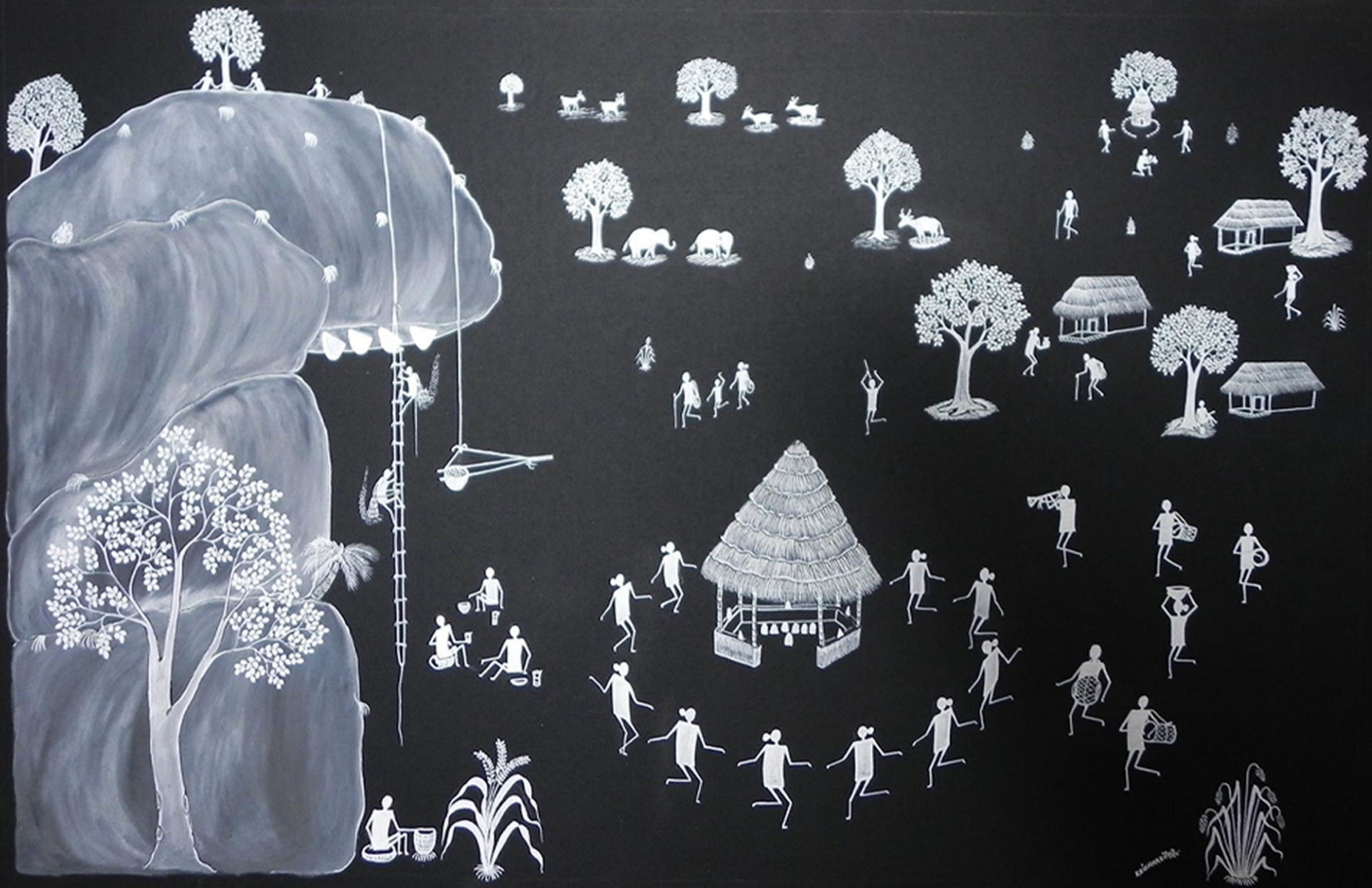
Kurumba Painting - Illustrating their life

Preserving Tribal Language through Community Engagement

Mr. Odiyen Lakshmanan

Introduction

Tribal languages are integral to the cultural heritage and identity of indigenous communities. However, many of these languages are endangered due to various factors including globalization and generational shifts. This paper l outlines a project aimed at preserving and revitalizing tribal languages through community engagement.

A. Language Box

Each tribal village or school should have a language box. We encourage students to contribute at least one word per day to this box.

To foster a deeper appreciation for the rich tapestry of languages spoken within tribal communities, we propose the establishment of a Language Box in every tribal village or school. These boxes would serve as repositories of local dialects, preserving and promoting linguistic diversity.

How it Works:

Daily Contributions: Students would be encouraged to contribute at least one word or phrase to the Language Box each day. This could be a word they've heard from an elder, a term they've learned in their daily lives, or even a newly coined word.

Community Involvement:

Parents, teachers, and community members could also contribute to the Language Box, sharing their knowledge and preserving the heritage of their language.

Language Learning: The Language Box would become a valuable resource for students and community members to learn and practice their local language. They could use the box to explore new words, improve their vocabulary, and engage in conversations with others.

Benefits of the Language Box Initiative:

Preservation of Indigenous Languages: By collecting and documenting local words, the Language Box would help to preserve endangered languages and prevent them from disappearing.

Promotion of Linguistic Diversity:

The initiative would raise awareness of the importance of linguistic diversity and encourage respect for different languages and cultures.

Empowerment of Tribal Communities: By giving students and community members a platform to share their language, the Language Box would empower them to take pride in their cultural heritage.

Educational Tool:

The Language Box could be used as a valuable educational tool, helping students to develop their language skills and learn about the history and culture of their community.

Through the Language Box initiative, we aim to create a space where students can connect with their cultural roots, learn from their elders, and contribute to the preservation of their language. By nurturing linguistic diversity, we can build stronger, more resilient communities and ensure that the rich heritage of tribal languages continues to thrive for generations to come.

B. Storytelling

Every fifteen days, our team provides students with a carefully selected story from a specific book. This book is chosen to align with the students' age, interests, and educational goals. After receiving the story, students are given two weeks to read it independently. During this time, they are encouraged to fully immerse themselves in the narrative, understanding the plot, characters, and underlying themes. Once the reading period is over, students are asked to retell the story in their own words. This exercise serves multiple purposes. First, it helps them solidify their comprehension of the story by organizing their thoughts and expressing them clearly. Second, it fosters creativity as students interpret the story through their unique perspectives. Finally, it reinforces language skills, as they practice using vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure to convey the narrative

The initial conversion of stories into tribal languages can be difficult. However, with consistent practice, the process will become smoother and more efficient. This will allow for better cultural preservation and understanding

C. Own stories

One of the most effective ways to connect tribal students with their rich cultural heritage is through storytelling through their own . By encouraging students to collect stories from their elders at home, we are not only fostering intergenerational bonds but also preserving a precious cultural legacy. This interactive activity provides a unique opportunity for students to delve into the past, learn about their ancestors' experiences, and gain a deeper appreciation for their traditions.

Elders, often repositories of wisdom and knowledge, are typically eager to share their stories. Their narratives, filled with tales of bravery, resilience, and community, offer valuable insights into the challenges and triumphs faced by previous generations. By listening attentively and asking thoughtful questions, students can uncover hidden gems of history and gain a better understanding of their own identity.

Furthermore, parents are often enthusiastic about participating in this storytelling initiative. Sharing their family's history with their children can be a meaningful and bonding experience. It allows them to pass down valuable traditions, cultural practices, and family values, ensuring that their legacy lives on

D. Broadcasting their native launge stories in available radios

To reach a broader audience, we're promoting these native language stories with Tamil subtitles on both city and internet radio stations. To enhance the campaign, we've designed an eye-catching poster to announce the broadcasts. We're also recognizing the valuable contributions of the children who participated in the school prayer or village function with thoughtful gifts. This gesture fosters confidence, pride, and reinforces their language skills, serving as a tangible reward for their efforts.

E. Story Writing in their native language

After engaging deeply with the elders in our community and collecting their rich, oral histories, we encouraged the students to channel their own creativity by crafting narratives in their native languages. The excitement and eagerness that this exercise has sparked among the students are truly palpable, as they immerse themselves in the storytelling process with remarkable passion. The resulting compositions are not only a testament to their enthusiasm but also reflect a profound and impressive depth of quality, capturing the essence of their cultural heritage and personal voices in a way that is both vibrant and meaningful

F. Making books

After completing these processes, we should create a book titled School Village, featuring the names of the parents. This initiative is designed to significantly boost students' enthusiasm for their studies. By including their parents' names in the book, we not only honor the role of families in the educational journey but also foster a deeper connection between home and school. This personal touch will encourage students to engage more actively in their writing and to express themselves creatively in their native language. The sense of pride and recognition that comes from seeing their families acknowledged in print will inspire students to write with greater passion and dedication. This approach not only celebrates their cultural heritage but also motivates them to embrace and refine their linguistic skills, ultimately enhancing their overall academic experience.

G. Traditional Songs

Traditional tribal songs, woven into the intricate fabric of a community's existence, serve as more than just melodies. They are living repositories of language, culture, and history, passed down through generations like precious heirlooms. These songs, often sung in the native tongue, provide a powerful medium for preserving linguistic diversity and cultural heritage.

By encapsulating the essence of a people's experiences, traditions, and beliefs, tribal songs create a shared identity and foster a sense of belonging. They offer a glimpse into the past, present, and future, preserving ancient wisdom and inspiring future generations. Moreover, the lyrical content of these songs often narrates stories, legends, and historical events, ensuring that the community's collective memory remains intact.

In today's world, where globalization and modernization often pose threats to indigenous languages, tribal songs can play a crucial role in revitalization efforts. By encouraging the use of these songs in text form and album formats, we can make them more accessible to a wider audience, including younger generations who may be less familiar with their native tongue. This approach not only helps to preserve the language but also fosters a deeper appreciation for the rich cultural heritage associated with it.

About the Author

Mr. Odiyen Lakshmanan is an independent researcher working extensively on Irula language. He has compiled and published Sappekokal, a collection of indigenous Irula songs accompanied by historical narratives presented in short story format, preserving and sharing cultural heritage of Irulas. He has recently released an audio album titled Emthu Naadu Male Naadu, featuring traditional Irula songs enhanced with original musical compositions, celebrating indigenous music. He is actively involved in preserving indigenous languages, ensuring their continued use and transmission to future generations.

Toda Embroidary