



Indigenous Language and Cultural Sustainability: A Study of Identity among the Irula Tribe of Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

Language is used as one of the most important identity indicators and serves as a central medium, on which cultural continuities are maintained and passed on especially in indigenous and tribal settings. Language in such contexts has been seen as at once a memory of the group, ecological know-how, belief system and systems of social organization, which have supported the stability of such communities. In these societies, language is not only a repository of accumulated knowledge but it is also a constructive and a reinforcing factor of community identity. It codifies localised world views and practices as well as the relationship interactions without which the cultural norm and unity would break down. The current research question concerns the interrelationships among language, identity and cultural sustainability of the Irula tribe of Tamil Nadu. The Irulas have a unique localized form of language that is closely related to the Dravidian linguistic family and this linguistic resource has been at the center of the continued cultural practices and unity of this group. However, the modern processes, such as modernization, prevailing of mainstream languages in formal education, migration pattern, and increasing rate of the environment has greatly affected the succession of language and consequently culture in the tribe. An inquiry of the impact of language in the Irula identity, how culture contributes to linguistic survival, and how current problems endanger the sustainability of the culture at large are informed by a qualitative literature review of secondary sources, ethnographic, and linguistic research. The paper also talks of current preservation efforts and points to the need to incorporate community-based approaches to effective preservation of the native languages. Finally, the preservation of the Irula language is stated as a necessary element of not only the cultural identity preservation but sustainable and equitable development in the community.

Keywords: Gothic, Psychological Turmoil, Horror, Multidisciplinary

Introduction

Language is both a central part of the cultural life of human society and a means of communication between subjects and a source of social knowledge. The two sides of its functions, which are transmitting information and maintaining common epistemic

resources, give prominence to the role it plays in sustaining cultural systems and their development.

Language is a vital part of the identity of indigenous and tribal groups and a captive of the historical accounts, ecological wisdom, and social beliefs, which have been passed down through the generations. The language use of the mentioned



groups thus represents a multicolored web of culture memory and context-specific thinking, which makes language an essential indicator of group identity.

There is a considerable contribution of tribal languages to language diversity in the Indian subcontinent, but most of the languages are marginalized because they did not receive enough institutional backing and because their national significance was diminishing as the major languages gained more and more hegemony. Such imbalanced policy systems and distributions of resources continue a status quo that favors dominant languages, thus limiting the existence and institutionalization of tribal linguistic traditions. The same can be said about Tamil Nadu and the Irula tribe; the language and the cultural heritage of this community is slowly fading away under the influence of the modern socio-economic forces. The loss of symbolic and functional elements of Irula life represents the more general issues of small linguistic groups having to face the issues of modernization and commercialization.

Historically it was the Irulas who occupied the areas bordering the forests in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and part of Karnataka, such as the Nilgiris, Coimbatore, Erode, Krishnagiri, Tiruvallur and Kanchipuram districts. The historical basis of their livelihoods was hunting, gathering, snake and rodent trapping, shifting cultivation, and use of indigenous medicinal knowledge. This intensive interaction with the environment is echoed in a language rich in words describing plants, animals, seasons, and ecological events, thus further supporting a whole-world view which is inherent in their language.

Urbanization, deforestation, formal educational growth and migration of labor have changed Irula ways of life and human relations in the last few decades in a fundamental way. Although these forces have expanded new economic opportunities, they also have aroused linguistic and cultural changes as the younger Irulas have turned to using Tamil and English in order to allow them to move socially at the cost of their native language. This direction urges critical thinking on identity making, cultural strength, and how the minority cultures can balance the

conflicting needs to maintain and adjust to the new demands.

Literature Review

The available literature on indigenous languages, identity, and cultural sustainability provides the detailed analytical framework of the study of the Irula phenomenon. The theoretical background needed to understand the way of reversing language attrition within the frames of the grassroots and inter-generational language transfer is based on the key research on the issue of language maintenance and language shift, specifically, the powerful concept of vernacular stability and community-based revitalization introduced by Joshua Fishman. Fishman stresses the vitality of familial and communal sphere in the process of the language shift back, which is specifically relevant to the Irulas, whose oral communication is the main source of the linguistic support (Fishman, 1991). The classic works by David Crystal on the topic of language death have provided the world with a view on the nature and consequences of linguistic attrition. Crystal outlines the accelerating speed of language loss in the world and highlights the consequent loss of cultural knowledge that accompanies the linguistic degradation. His typological segments of the endangered language and policy proposals are dangerous because they underline the urgent necessity of systematic recording and renewal programs (Crystal, 2000).

In the Indian context, the studies by Annamalai on the topic of multilingual education and language policy help us to understand the institutional processes that create linguistic hierarchies. Annamalai argues that the conventional educational systems are habitually biased towards the mainstream languages thus disadvantaging the lesser tribal languages and creating a sense of identity loss by the native youth. This is especially critical to the Irula community where teaching in the dominant languages can lead to the loss of mother tongue language (Annamalai, 2001; Mohanty, 2009).

Ethnographic studies of South Indian tribe communities, such as the regional ethnography of the



Blue Mountains by Hockings, provide very important contextual information regarding interaction between ecology, subsistence, and cultural expression. Hockings shows how ecological expertise and ritual actions have been embedded into the local languages and how environmental changes have been disruptive to cultural systems.

Such ethnographic views are inalienable to the understanding of material and symbolic bases of the Irula identity (Hockings, 1989).

The contemporary research on indigenous knowledge systems and sustainable development preindicates the utilitarian importance of tribal ecological knowledge to conservation of biodiversity and to development that is consonant to culture. Other researchers like Reddy (2016) argue that the safeguarding of linguistic heritage cannot be done without sustainable development because language is where specialised knowledge is stored about the local ecosystem and resource management. This literature promotes development models that will integrate and not replace indigenous knowledge and languages.

However, there is a limited and ad hoc scholarly study of Irula language. There is a small body of linguistic and anthropological literature recording Irula lexical items, phonological systems and oral traditions, but a small body of descriptive grammars and longitudinal revitalisation programs. This gap characterizes the necessity of high-focused documentation, participatory research, and community-based pedagogical strategies tailored to the Irula socio-cultural background. Other methodological approaches that are noted to be effective in the study of indigenous language would be participatory action research, community-based documentation and the mother-tongue education program. Combining the ethnography depth and applied linguistic has proved to be effective in similar contexts and offers a possible approach to the preservation of the Irula language. These approaches anticipate the agency of communities, respect local knowledge, and relate linguistic practices to livelihood and education.

Overall, the literature, which we have, provides an all-encompassing conceptual framework cutting across language shift theories, language policy criticism, contextualisation of ethnographic background, and strategies of applied revitalisation and, therefore, has informed the study of the Irula phenomenon. The paper expands on that multidisciplinary corpus and focuses on the lack of research that is focused on Irula, sustained, and proposes that community-centered interventions can be implemented.

The Irula Tribe: Social and Cultural Background

In modern anthropological sense the Irula tribe is officially considered a Scheduled Tribe in the state of the Tamil Nadu and can be considered as one of the most visible indigenous populations of South India. The etymological question of the word Irula usually links it to the Tamil word *irul*, meaning darkness; researchers assume that it can symbolically mean that the tribe is rooted to a high extent in forest-covered areas or that their ancient lifestyle was nocturnal.

However, it is urgently needed to learn that Irula identity is not formed by means of linguistic derivation only but appears as an intricate interaction of socio-cultural norms and ecological identities. In its structure, Irula society is conventionally structured around small, kin-based settlements located in the vicinity of forested and hilly regions. The social structure highly values kinship, collectivism labor and mutual support systems. In this regard, the elders of the community play the key roles of maintaining the level of social cohesion, resolving conflicts, and placing ritualistic activities under guard. Marital traditions, festival celebrations and religious events all show a blend of local beliefs and localized Hindu traditions, which show how their cultural weave is of a hybrid nature. Epistemologically, the Irula have a vast store of ecological knowledge particularly in recognition of medicinal plants, animal tracking and decoding of environmental elements. This information is largely passed down through oral traditions in successive generations making language a very crucial medium



through which culture is passed down. Linguistic use is, therefore, being lost, which has a direct negative influence on the sustainability of traditional knowledge systems and, consequently, the cultural identity of the Irula people as a whole.

Linguistic Characteristics of the Irula Language

Irula language belonging to the native Irula people is located in the Dravidian language family and it exhibits significant structural similarities with Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam. It is often known as Irula or Iruliga and is marked by some phonological characteristics, lexical peculiarities, and syntactic structures, which make it different to the Tamil that is normally used. The Irula language is closely connected to Tamil but it retains peculiar expressions that have been developed in the historical paths of the community and its environment. Irula language is only used as an oral vernacular and there has been very little written records of the tongue to date.

This has even marginalised it in official education and administration because of the absence of a standardised orthography and a traditional literary tradition. However, the Irula linguistic corpus is full of specialized vocabulary that refers to natural resources, sociocultural relationships, rituals and occupations of the trade. Many of the lexical notions inherent to the language cannot be easily translated into other major languages, which also highlights the strong cultural specificity of the language.

Trends in the use of the language show high intergenerational differences. The old people are generally good speakers, who use Irula in their daily lives and in cultural activities. However, young Irulas, more so those who have been exposed to formal education and urban environments, usually regress to either Tamil or English. The change brought by this generation highlights the uncertainty of the language transfer process and questions the sustainability of the Irula language in the long run.

Language and the Construction of Identity

Language is an effective identifiable characteristic since it helps people to identify themselves and to be culturally different. In the case of the Irula tribe, their

native language serves as a symbol of their collective identity, cementing a feeling of family roots, values and world-view. It separates the community of non-tribal people living around it and identifies their belonging to the ancestral land and traditions. The daily use of Irula language in daily communication enhances social unity and togetherness. Storytelling, or oral histories, songs, and speech in rituals are crucial to the development of communal consciousness. These stories provide a means of transmission of cultural norms, ethical values, and even historical experiences to younger generations and help them construct an identity. Nonetheless, the construct of linguistic identity is becoming more influenced by the external factors. The identity negotiation and language shift have been caused by the stigmatization of tribal languages as inferior or non-standard. In most situations, the families of Irulas promote the use of speaking dominant languages to improve education and financial prospects. Even though such an approach could help people to socially move, it can also undermine cultural identity and intergenerational continuity.

Cultural Practices and Language Maintenance

The cultural practices give the necessary backgrounds to the maintenance of the language use among the Irulas. Rituals, festivals, folk songs, and oral traditions are also the areas where symbolic and operational importance of the indigenous language is preserved. Prayers and ritual songs usually use the traditional forms of language that stress the sanctity of the language. One of the most important elements of the Irula culture is oral literature. Natural phenomena and folktales, myths of animals and spirits, and legacies of ancestors are passed on orally, and language is placed in the cultural memory. These stories are used as informal education, they teach moral, environmental and social responsibilities. The occupational and subsistence practices that are traditional also help in the continuation of linguistics. The Irula language contains knowledge on herbal medicine, animal behaviour and seasonal cycles. With changing livelihood patterns and declining traditional practices, there are less opportunities of



meaningful language use, which is a factor that fuels the erosion of languages.

Contemporary Challenges to Cultural Sustainability

The Irula culture and language have a variety of threats to the modern socio-economic environment.

Formal education systems, which are mostly carried out either in Tamil or English, often discriminate the native languages. Lack of education in native language may alienate Irula children and also lower the position of their native language. Economic strains and migration are some of the causes of low language usage. The migration of Irulas to the urban centres in search of jobs also requires them to learn the dominant languages to survive and only use their native language in the private life. The cultural ambition is also affected by media exposure and globalization, which may emphasize the mainstream identities at the expense of the indigenous ones. Cultural sustainability is also threatened by changes in the environment. Deforestation, land alienation, and limited forest access interfere with the traditional livelihoods and knowledge systems. Ecological degradation has a direct impact on linguistic and cultural resilience because Irula culture and language are directly related to the natural environment.

Preservation Efforts and Community Initiatives

Irula language and culture have been recorded and preserved although these have been a challenge. Non-governmental organisations and researchers have gone to an effort to document oral histories, folk songs, and traditional knowledge. This documentation is very important in the preservation of linguistic heritage and awareness creation of cultural diversity. The institutional framework of sustainability is provided by governmental policies which are directed on the tribal welfare and cultural preservation, but the way of their successful realization is imbalanced. Activities that promote mother-tongue education, cultural festivals, and livelihood development can also help deny cultural resilience as programs that are planned in partnership

with the community. The key to successful preservation is the involvement of the community. Language transmission among generations, cultural pride and incorporation of indigenous knowledge into local governance can also make identities and sustainability stronger. To have a culturally sensitive development, it is important that the Irula voices be empowered in making decisions.

Language, Identity, and Sustainable Development

Cultural sustainability is focused on safekeeping cultural diversity and social-economic development. Sustainable development to the Irula community should realise the linguistic aspect of language as a cultural resource but not a hindrance to modernisation. The value of indigenous knowledge systems can be used to benefit cultural resilience and environmental stewardship, as well as support development planning when incorporated into it. The connection between the language maintenance and the educational and economic empowerment may develop the interest towards linguistic maintenance. Learning outcomes and self-esteem of tribal children can be enhanced by having educational models which allow the use of indigenous languages and cultural knowledge. These approaches are in line with larger objectives of inclusive and equitable development. The Irula experience highlights the need to take care of linguistic and cultural rights as social justice. Preservation of native languages helps in preserving the human heritage as well as furthering pluralism in multicultural communities.

Conclusion

The theme of language, identity, and cultural sustainability is entrenched in the life of the Irula tribe in Tamil Nadu. The Irula language serves as an important source of cultural information and ecological knowledge and social values which form person and group identities. Modern pressures, including the language drift, socio-economic reshaping, and environmental alteration endanger the survival of this legacy which supports the sense of urgency in intervention on a scholarly level and the implementation of policies. In this paper, the issue of



maintaining the Irula language as a tool of maintaining cultural identity and environmentally inclusive development has been emphasized. Mother-tongue schooling, documentation, community involvement and culturally sensitive policies are important in making sure that it is sustainable in the long term. The inherent importance of indigenous languages is the key to preserving cultural diversity and promoting social equity, and this assumption can be kept in line with the dominant discourse in the anthropological linguistics and developmental literature. The maintenance of Irula language and culture is not only a conservation exercise but an oath to the acknowledgement of the native body of knowledge and identities. By endorsing such work, this helps to build a more inclusive and sustainable future in which cultural plurality is appreciated and enhances the broader epistemological theories based on the need to preserve linguistic and cultural heritage as part and parcel of human growth.

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