

Indians losing their mother tongue

Thaindian News (23 October 2009)

New Delhi, Oct 23 (IANS) - In a largely Hindi and English-based education system in India, mother tongues are being wiped out and it is for the parents to step in to revive their language identity, experts said here Friday. Linguists say 196 Indian languages were presently on the endangered list.

"We can help, as linguists, in preparing material for preserving these languages, but eventually it is the communities that must want to preserve the language," Jean Robert Oppenort, a Unesco researcher for endangered languages in Himalayas said.

Linguists like Oppenort and educators discussed how to revive endangered languages at a two-day international seminar which ended Thursday.

The event was organised by heritage conservation body Intach to assess the findings of the Unesco Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, 2009 that said 196 Indian languages were endangered.

"In areas in the Himalayan region there are small number of speakers of Sino-tibetan languages, which are unwritten and poorly documented. Here parents can play an essential role."

S.K. Mishra, chairman of Intach, said: "Educationists must derive plan and policy for encouraging mother tongues to be learnt in initial stages."

"In the global scenario, English and in India the dominance of Hindi is killing so many languages. For example regional and tribal languages like Chattisgarhi and Bagheli are hardly spoken by the newer generations," Mishra observed.

Another scholar, Lisa Lomdak from the Arunachal Institute of Tribal Studies discussed the threats to tribal languages which according to the experts amount to 80 percent of the endangered languages enlisted by Unesco.

She said: "The advantages of using Hindi are many but this process is now leading us to a critical state of language loss. It is replacing the mother tongue of tribals significantly in the domestic domain. We have come to a critical situation where generations of youngsters are acquiring Arunachalee Hindi rather than their own mother tongue."

Anvita Abbi, from the Centre of Linguists of Jawaharlal Nehru University, said that India earlier followed an effective "four language formula".

"Children were taught their mother tongue, the regional language, lingua franca or link language like Hindi as well as a English," Abbi said.

"Now instead of ignoring them for choosing Hindi or English we must advocate the use of the mother tongue even in school," she added.

G.D. Prasad Sastry, a research officer for the ministry of human resource development's Central Institute for Indian Languages and Centre for Tribal Languages, said the government lacked the will to tackle the problem which could lead to loss of culture and heritage associated with the language.

The seminar has prepared recommendations like suggesting parents propagate mother tongue and tackle monolingualism in schools by stressing on the other languages in primary level.

These will be discussion with authorities like National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and human resource development ministry for practical implementation.