

## LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT IN NORTHEAST INDIA

### Abstract

This paper is divided into two parts: the first part discusses language endangerment in Northeast India in general, and the second part specifically discusses the diminishing cultural aspects of Thadou-Kuki. In part one, the paper pointed out that list of endangered languages presented in UNESCO's Atlas of World's languages is not comprehensive and it leaves out many of the undocumented languages in some parts of Northeast India, particularly in the regions of Barak valley (southern Assam), and the hills of Tripura adjoin Barak valley. The paper also pointed out that the parameters used by UNESCO Atlas 2010 for accessing language endangerment are not precisely clear. Therefore the paper re-accesses the level of language endangerment based on domains of language use, such as language use in school education, mass media, and literature available in the language. The remainder of part one is devoted to discussing the known factors for language endangerment, particularly in the area of language contact and bilingualism from the available literature and with fresh inputs with the claim that although these factors affect the structure in varying ways, they do not pose an immediate threat to native languages so long as they are spoken in their community domain. Rather, migration to cities for socio-economic advancement poses more threats on the children who have not been associated with their community settings where the ancestor's languages are spoken. The paper also pointed out that besides the dominion languages of wider communication, such as Bengali and Assamese in Assam, or Manipuri in Manipur, which influences the smaller languages with less social and economic prestige, the ever-increasing use of English in education is a major factor of language attrition, particularly among the youths and educated class who see English as a vehicle of empowerment and as a social ladder for development. The paper also discusses the issue and problems of the writing system and lack of standardization, and the minimal use of smaller languages in education and mass media which have come in the way of development for smaller languages in Northeast India. The paper concludes part one of the paper, with an anecdote that despite various threats from different quarters, some extra-linguistic factors, such as loyalty toward the tribe they belong to (which can be equated with language in the context of Northeast India, with possible overlapping), and their emotional and cultural attachment towards their lands (which they are never willing to part away from) help in some way in the preservation of their language and culture; which of course need to be strengthened with linguistic empowerment.

The second part of the paper discusses the diminishing cultural knowledge of Thadou-Kuki, a Tibeto-Burman language of the Kuki-Chin subgroup. Thadou-Kuki is not critically endangered as Aimol or Ruga, yet vulnerable. Besides, migration, language contact, and bilingualism which have influenced the language over the years, Thadou-Kuki cultural knowledge and practices have been ever on the decline. The decline of traditional knowledge and practices described here is a reflection not only of Thadou-Kuki, but perhaps of other languages of the region. Some of these diminishing cultural knowledge include speech abstinence known as *hàmpôlôt* that the Thadou-Kukis have to abstain from while in the fields, riddles which are deeply rooted in the agricultural practices and the fauna and flora around them, proverbs, and lullabies. Besides these genres, the paper also discusses curse words in the language, and other poetic and religious terms and expressions which are fast dying out.

### References

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