

Disappearing languages, vanishing voices

English as a common language in India has been acting as a thread by connecting multilingual Indians since the time of the British Raj. While communication in English is not much of a problem in the cities, the language becomes an impediment in the remote areas. This leads to the question: why cannot all people in the world speak in the same language? It would be so much simpler and strengthen our power as a united human force.

Let us look at the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel. In Chapter 11 of the *Book of Genesis*, it is said that the descendants of Noah, after the aftermath of the great flood, spoke a common language. They migrated towards the east and finally settled down at a place called Shinar. They began building a city and a tower tall enough to reach heaven as a demonstration of their collective strength.

Yahweh, the god of the Hebrew Bible, became alarmed and annoyed on observing this, and broke them into many groups, each speaking a different language to reduce the power of their collective strength. This created confusion in terms of communication and understanding and the project failed. Some people are of the opinion that the British made a blunder teaching English to Indians which helped them to unite, communicate and become powerful enough to end colonialism.

Irrespective of whether the story is true or not, the writer of this narrative knew the power of a common language. Language is a vehicle to transfer information, ideas and emotions.

A forecast of language extinction

An estimated 7,000 distinct languages are spoken as a mother tongue across the world. But these languages are shrinking rapidly. An interesting mathematical model published in *The Economic Journal* which forecasts the extinction of 40% of languages with less than 35,000 speakers within 100 years. By extinction it is meant that the languages will no longer be spoken as a mother tongue, or as the principal language. In essence, the diversity of languages is shrinking with time.

Mother tongues of about half the people in the world belong to a pool of 10 most spoken languages; language diversity faces a grave threat. Today, English is the most widely spoken language of the world. British colonial rule helped spread the language.

This shrinking in the diversity of languages and



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their extinction are also related to the migration of people to countries which have a common language. When people migrate, there is pressure to shift to the dominant language spoken in the country where they live in order to capitalise on the social and economic advantages offered by the new place. In the process, first-generation migrants become bilingual, the next generation has a weaker grasp of its mother tongue, and the third generation may no longer speak or understand their grandparents or great-grandparents at all. India is a good example with increasing migration to English-speaking countries. English now has 340 million native speakers and more than 1.2 billion second language speakers, with much scope for further growth. One wonders what would happen to Hindi, with an estimated 586 million second language speakers in the world. Would it grow to the level of English?

On the language index

The Index of Linguistic Diversity (ILD), which was introduced to quantitatively understand the trends over the past 30 years in the number of mother-tongue speakers of the world's languages, is a measure to gauge the decline of languages. There is also a Language Diversity Index, where the probability that two people selected from a population at random will have different mother tongues; it ranges from 0 (everyone has the same mother tongue) to 1 (no two people have the same mother tongue). Obviously, countries that have people with a smaller number of mother languages have a lower LDI than countries with a large number of mother tongues. For example, the United Kingdom has an LDI of 0.139 when compared to 0.930 for India. Interestingly, although the predominant language in the United States is English as in the United Kingdom, due to the significant presence of migrants from different countries, the LDI of the U.S. is 0.353. In terms of LDI, the three lowest ranking countries are Haiti (0.000), Cuba (0.001) and Samoa (0.002), while the top ranking three countries are Papua Guinea (0.990), Vanuatu (0.972) and the Solomon Islands (0.965).

The ILD demonstrates that globally, linguistic diversity declined by 20% over the period 1970-2005. Regionally, indigenous linguistic diversity declined over 60% in the Americas, 30% in the Pacific including Australia and almost 20% in Africa. But calculating the index from a sample of only a certain number of languages, let us say

1,000 languages out of 7,000 languages, over a period of time may not give us the correct picture as the world population is also increasing. The index actually tries to understand the distribution of speakers among all the spoken languages of the world. What has been found is that the distribution is becoming greatly uneven with the passage of time.

What we see is that a greater number of people in the world are transitioning to just a few dominant languages at the expense of several smaller ones, resulting in a loss of linguistic diversity, where, finally, some of the languages are becoming extinct. According to the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), dozens of languages today have only one living native speaker, which shows how precariously placed some languages are. Once they vanish, an identity and culture also vanish.

Language is not only a vehicle for communication to express ideas and emotions but it also carries cultural values and indigenous knowledge. The extinction of languages will only result in shrinking cultural diversity and an increase in cultural homogenisation.

The situation in India, need for strategies

According to a report published by UNESCO in 2018, 42 languages are heading towards extinction in India. These were spoken by less than 10,000 people. According to the norms set by UNESCO, any language spoken by only 10,000 people is potentially endangered. Most dying languages are from the indigenous tribal groups spread across India.

The world is very concerned about biodiversity and is alarmed by the loss of species. Different languages can be compared to distinct species in the linguasphere, if we can use such a term. Any loss of language is not only a loss of linguistic diversity but also a loss in terms of associated cultural variations, opinions, views and knowledge. It is time to evolve ideas to arrest the decline of languages on the larger global canvas. The world must at least try to find ways and means to preserve some of its endangered languages. The LSA is doing an admirable job in trying to learn about these endangered languages; it is also making videotapes, audiotapes and written records of the languages, along with their translation. It is hoped that other institutions will emulate this and act to reduce the disappearance of languages in whichever way they can.

Finding Seoul in the Indo-Pacific

The historic Camp David summit in August this year among the leaders of the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK) marks the new beginning of the strategic partnership among the three traditional allies. As India and ROK commemorate the 50th year of their diplomatic relations, the Camp David summit, and a refreshingly new strategic thinking in Seoul, offer a unique opportunity for New Delhi to reimagine its relations with South Korea especially in the Indo-Pacific. Along with Japan and the U.S., ROK has the potential to emerge as a key piece in India's Indo-Pacific strategy. It is however important to view the prospects of the India-ROK strategic partnership in the broader context of the recent geopolitical developments in the East Asian region. Here is an outline of some of them.

The significance of the Camp David meet

One of the most significant developments in the region has been the South Korea-Japan-U.S. trilateral meeting in the U.S. or the Camp David summit last month. For one, it indicates a much-needed repair in Seoul-Tokyo relations. This positive bilateral development is the function of a recognition of the changing regional security environment by the three countries. This could, along with AUKUS (the U.S., the United Kingdom, Australia), the Quad (India, Japan, Australia, the U.S.), or CHIP 4 Alliance (the U.S., Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea) lead to a strengthened U.S.-led alliance structure – though dispersed to reflect the multipolar urges of the contemporary international system – in East Asia.

Second, the summit has the potential to set South Korea on a new strategic direction in the Indo-Pacific with improved relations with Tokyo, more synergy with the American view on China, and enhanced engagement of the Indo-Pacific.

Third, this also marks a strategic shift in Seoul's traditional approach of not offending China at any cost. The previous government, for instance, was far too shy of articulating the China challenge given its potential strategic fallout and



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The outcome of the South Korea-Japan-U.S. trilateral meeting gives New Delhi and Seoul a unique opportunity to enhance their strategic partnership

Seoul's economic proximity to Beijing (around 20% of its total exports go to China). The new thinking appears to indicate the view that trade dependence on China does not mean passivity towards a growing Chinese military presence in the region.

Fourth, there is today a keen desire in ROK to join the Quad grouping. Seoul has wanted it for some time, but it was unsure whether Tokyo would support its bid given lingering bitterness from historical memories. The Camp David summit may have changed that and it is possible that South Korea might apply for a membership in a Quad Plus next year.

Finally, there is a new foreign policy enthusiasm in Seoul today. President Yoon Suk Yeol has declared that the main goal of his foreign policy would be to make South Korea a "global pivotal state". The country's engagement of the U.S. and Japan, support to Ukraine, articulation of the China challenge and a desire to play a bigger role in the Indo-Pacific underline this new vision.

This geopolitical context provides a unique opportunity for India and ROK to enhance their strategic partnership in the 50th year of their diplomatic relationship. There are a number of reasons why ROK is a natural partner for India in the Indo-Pacific. For one, ROK's location in the Indo-Pacific, close to China, while being a U.S. ally provides India with a like-minded strategic partner. Second, for both ROK and India, the rise of China and its unilateral attempts at reordering the Asian security architecture are of great concern even if the two sides hesitate in clearly articulating the China threat. Third, for India, Seoul can be an important regional partner at a time when India is closer to the U.S. than ever before in its history, and is concerned about Chinese intentions and power like never before in history.

Defence, nuclear reactors as focus areas

There are several areas where the two countries could focus on in order to strengthen their relationship. At the political and diplomatic levels, the two sides should consider establishing

an annual summit at the level of the Foreign Ministers, and a 2+2 format dialogue (India currently has 2+2 dialogues with the U.S., Japan, Australia and Russia). The partnership could also benefit from reciprocal visits by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Mr. Yoon to each other's country. Perhaps the two sides could be even more ambitious and explore the possibility of negotiating a South Korea-Japan-India-U.S. initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (ICET), along the lines of the recently-concluded India-U.S. ICET. Defence is another area where they could strengthen their relationship. South Korea's willingness and ability to cater to India's defence needs within the ambit of India's 'Make in India' programme must be utilised. The K9 Vajra, a 155 mm self-propelled howitzer, built by L&T with technology from South Korea's Hanwha Defense is an example in this regard. South Korean-built K2 Black Panther tanks could also be co-produced in India for the Indian Army or third countries.

Another area of collaboration still could be in the context of Korean-built civilian nuclear reactors. Even after the conclusion of the India-U.S. civil nuclear deal, India-International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards agreement and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) waiver, New Delhi has not been able to import any nuclear reactors due to the difficulties foreign suppliers have with India's nuclear liability law. Given India's growing need for clean energy and Seoul's remarkable track record in supplying cheaper and faster nuclear reactors to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and central European states, New Delhi could consider purchasing Korean-built reactors so as to expand the share of nuclear energy in the country's energy basket – if indeed Seoul is open to working within the Indian liability law and the subsequent assurances given by the Indian government.

ROK, with a new strategic outlook, and along with the U.S., Japan and Australia, is uniquely placed to help India advance its interests in the Indo-Pacific.