Proceedings of the First All India Meet of the CFEL Research Clusters

Venue: Bhasha Bhavana Auditorium, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan

Date: 06.10.2015

The First All India meet of the Centre for Endangered Languages (CFEL) Research Clusters was held on 06.10.2015 at the Bhasha Bhavana Auditorium of Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan. The meeting was attended by the following members of the CFEL Research Clusters—

1. Prof. Udaya Narayana Singh, Professor, Rabindra Bhavana & Chair, Centre for Endangered Languages, Visvs-Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal
2. Prof. H. M. Maheshwaraiah, Vice Chancelor, Central University of Karnataka
3. Prof. P.K. Bajpai, Professor, Department of Pure & Applied Physics , Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Chattisgarh
4. Prof. Madhumita Barbora, Professor, Department of EFL, Tezpur University, Assam
5. Prof. Gautam Bora, Professor, Dept of EFL, Tezpur University, Assam
6. Dr Simon John, Associate Professor, Arunachal Institute of Tribal Studies, Rajiv Gandhi University, Itanagar
7. Dr Lisa Lomdak, Assistant Professor, Arunachal Institute of Tribal Studies, Rajiv Gandhi University, Itanagar
8. Dr. Prasad Pannian, Dean, School of Languages and Comparative Literature, Central University of Kerala
9. Dr. Basavaraja Kodagunti, Department of Kannada, Central University of Karnataka
10. Dr Tulsi Das Manjhi, Assistant Professor, Centre for Indigenous Cultural Studies, Central University of Jharkhand
11. Bidisha Bhattacharjee, Assistant Professor, Centre for Endangered Languages, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal
12. Dr. Arimardan Kumar Tripathi, Documentation Officer, Centre for Endangered Languages, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal
13. Rajib Chakraborty, Assistant Professor, Centre for Endangered Languages, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal

As scheduled the meeting started right at 10.30 a.m. Prof. Udaya Narayana Singh welcomed everybody on behalf of CFEL, Visva-Bharati. It was followed by self-introduction by all members present.

The key-note address was delivered by Prof. Udaya Narayana Singh paying a fitting tribute to Prof. Suniti Kumar Chatterji, whose 125th birth centenary is being observed this year. Prof. Singh in his key-note address clearly outlined the present scenario of the language endangerment in India, nay in South-East Asia and stressed upon the need for establishing such Centres for the research, documentation and preservation of language and culture of the minor linguistic groups. He also mentioned that we look at the endangered species index in terms of a bio-diversity map, the threat to multilingualism is similar to the threat to biodiversity, not just because most languages are like disappearing "species", but also because there is an intrinsic and causal link between biological

diversity and cultural diversity. Prof. Singh further clarified that like plant and animal species, endangered languages are confined to small areas and more than 80% of countries with great biological diversity are also the places with the greatest number of endangered languages. When people adapt to their environment, they create a special stock of knowledge about it, which is mirrored in their language, and is available only in such languages. Many of the world's endangered plant and animal species today are known only to certain people whose languages are dying out. As they die, they also take with them all the traditional knowledge about the environment. Quoting Nettle and Romaine (2000:14) Prof. Singh said that every language is like a living museum and every language contributes to the totality of human knowledge as it exists at any given point of time. With the death of a language "all its creativity including art, poetry, music, science, technology, and the ideas about life, death and even language are lost". Hence, documenting and preserving endangered languages are the need of the hour—observed Prof. Singh. The concern for vanishing cultures and endangered languages began with UNESCO's major International Project of the World Atlas of Endangered Languages. UNESCO's report came out in 2007 which created a lot of confusion regarding status of language endangerment in India. To address the confusions arising out of the UNESCO report a through survey of languages in India needs to taken up. Establishment of nine (9) CFELs by UGC is a step forward to that direction. Prof. Singh discussed at length the survey methodologies to be adopted, the tools and technology required for it and the tasks ahead. The smaller speech groups immediately need the following—grammars, primers, graded teaching-learning activities, literacy books, general purpose dictionary, thesauri, wordnet, specialized glossary, cultural and visual documentation, style manuals, etc. All the CFELs will work in unison towards reaching the goal of reaching the hitherto unreached by way of rejuvenating, preserving, documenting their language and culture.

Members present in the meeting exchanged their ideas, opinions and plans for preparing a detailed road map to gear up the actual survey work and other modes of operation. Matters regarding publication of survey reports, newsletters, occasional papers, etc. also surfaced in the discussion. The issue of language documentation and archiving in audio-visual mode using digital technology was discussed with due importance. In this connection two sample documentaries on Lepcha and .... languages were screened. The meeting ended with the hope to evolve a better and more suitable action plan for endangered language research in India, thereby ensuring linguistic human rights to each and every speaker of this country.

Following are the decisions arrived at in the meeting—

    i.   There are five important tasks ahead, viz.

        a. **Identification of language to work on:** Database of 2011 Census may be the point of departure in charting out the initial list of endangered languages in India apart from considering the list provided in Mosley's *Atlas* (2007). Previous census reports must be taken into consideration in order to prepare an evolutionary status of the so called endangered languages. Grierson's LSI would also be another source to be taken into consideration. The list of endangered languages provided by UNESCO should be revisited/checked in the light of today's data as it may not represent the true scenario of language endangerment in India.

        b. **Framing up methodology & questionnaire:** After consulting all available/major questionnaire (e.g. CIIL questionnaire, Anvita Abbi's questionnaire, etc) for field

study a consolidated questionnaire would be prepared by CFEL, Visva-Bharati. The questionnaire will be kept open online for comments by other linguists/experts etc. Questionnaire may also be sent to experts for their opinions/suggestions, etc. Suggestions from linguists/experts would be duly incorporated into the questionnaire before 'freezing' it finally. For field work, clustering of geographical areas based on language map need to be done. Sociolinguistic profiling—based on demographic information, economic & educational background, etc.—of each language should be prepared.

c. **Tools and Technology:** All the CFELs must use servers with identical configuration, uniform format for data management & preservation in order to share and exchange data seamlessly. CFEL, VIsva-Bharati will provide technical specifications—which they have already prepared—to other CFELs.

d. **Publication of journals/occasional papers/reports, etc.:** An editorial committee comprising of eminent linguists, language experts may be constituted for each CFEL to monitor the publications of journals/occasional papers/reports, etc.

e. **Financial Matters:** CFEL will prepare a uniform financial guideline based on GFR and UGC's rules and communicate the same to other CFELs. All CFELs should be open to financial audit as is customary for such projects.

ii. **Other issues:**

a. **Enumerators and their appointment:**

Qualification of enumerators:

Essential—M.A./M.Phil./Ph.D. in Linguistics, Language Technology, Anthropology, Geography, Culture Studies (including Indigenous Studies), Language & Literature (any Indian language), Sociology, Education, Folklore, Tribal Studies, Mass Communication, Area Studies.

Desirable—Experience in fieldwork, a native speaker/ proficiency in the major language spoken in a particular area with minimum essential qualification and training in computer operations.

Appointment— **i.** advertisement to be published in leading national dailies, website, notice board of the respective university/centre, **ii.** Personal interview. The Coordinator/Chair of the respective CFEL may be the Chairman of the appointment committee—permission to be sought from the VC of respective university. Appointment may be made as per GOI rules. GOI's reservation policy has to be followed in appointing enumerators/transcribers, etc.

b. **Training of enumerators**—8-10-day training on linguistic data collection, training on use of devices, etc. for enumerators.

c. **Time frame for basic survey**—8-14 days/language/enumerator. A group of two persons for each language may be appointed. However, depending on the situation the number of enumerator, number of days, etc may also change.

d. **Ethical issues**—Each survey should begin with an ethical statement. Each and every informant should be informed about the future use of the data he/she provides. Their approval/permission—either audio-visually or in black and white—should be kept on record for publishing the data. Responsibility of errors should be borne by the transcribers.

e. **Work Permit**—To work in remote and politically sensitive areas—like Nagaland, Manipur, etc.—work permit has to be procured from the competent authorities. In some of these areas use of GPS may not be allowed—digital/visual recording would be the only option.

f. **Audio-visual documentation**—Documentaries may be prepared by students as well as by experts. CIIL's expertise may be sought for visual documentation of language communities. Financial calculation in this regard may be done on CIIL's suggestions. CFEL may also ask for copies of their works. Director, CIIL may also be approached for procuring names of persons for making such documentaries.