

Biodiversity, language and logical participation of the state

Language is ceaselessly constructed; it exists, and is also transformed, depending on the relationship of biodiversity, and by protecting that relationship. So far, the initiatives and participation of the state regarding the issues of language and biodiversity were not distinctively different from the corporate controlled male chauvinist attitudes. On the one hand, right to mother language is recognised, while on the other, not enough initiatives are taken to protect the matrilineal elements and resources that construct that mother language. When a language loses its matrilineal elements, it can no longer be called a mother language. So, state initiative is an imperative, as the linguistic space and structure is dependent on the conservation of biodiversity.

PAVEL PARTHA

LANGUAGE is no unilateral, linear medium. Because of the ways of expression, production of meaning and the discursive space it creates, language is represented as a global phenomenon. Whether it is mainstream or subaltern, it is always related to the power structure. When Bengali middleclass people go to Shaheed Minar bare footed on the morning of Ekushey February, or when the United Nations declares it International Mother Language Day, its historical multiplicity becomes more evident. How a language spreads, or how it is constructed, or how it exists, attracts our attention.

It is often said that many languages are on the verge of extinction/are lost forever. But can any language be lost forever? What does this suppression of language indicate? Does any institutional aggression or hegemony become the language suppressing the many faces of language?

Raising these questions within the language discourse, and searching for a solution, is very important for political decision-making regarding language. As we have seen, a language does not become extinct for nothing, without any external intervention. A language faces such a fate when the elements and conditions in which it is constructed, and functions, are altered. In this process, a language loses its own distinctive features and becomes a concept of a dominant linguistic scheme/hegemony.

In that altered reality, the altered/new language structure is also presented as a "new" formation of that language. We are told that it is an inevitable process of linguistic change. "Why should a language survive when it does not deserve to be so worthy?" (Survival of the fittest!). In this article we want to consider the relationship between language, biodiversity and the participation of the state. It is an important issue as it is directly related to the sovereignty of the state and the continued existence of the people and institutional framework of the state.

Language grows around the surrounding ecology and ecosystem -- language is a part of ecologi-

cal systems and is diffused around local biodiversity. It is the philosophical statement of this delta landscape. We do not want this discourse to be ethnocentric. But we present a platform of relationship between the languages people use and the biodiversity of this landscape.

Once Mandis used to live in big trees of ha.chek(hill/mountain). Then rurupa kokothokopa (procupine) one day asked them: "Can't you build houses?" Balfong nokma chipong rachcha (crab of mountain streams) first showed the way. Then came me.npa chekshenpa (sal forest insect) and taught them the technique of making bamboo sheds. Saramma dusinem (sal forest bird) showed the way of living in that house.

Then Mandis built their own houses and started to live in them, in Mandi kusus (language) it is called nokmandi. These ideas no longer exist in Mandi kusus of Madhupur sal forest. As there is no sal forest, no nokmandi now, ideas like rurupa kokothokopa, me.npa chekshenpa, saramma dusinem have also disappeared.

ADB and other donor agencies have imported "development" agendas, and corporate companies have expanded their business in Madhupur. The Sal forest has undergone a total transformation under National Park/eco park projects and colonial forest laws(1927). In this changing situation, the condition of the Mandi language and of oppressed Mandi life under this transformation is never taken into consideration in any institutional framework or policy reform processes related to forest biodiversity conservation, indigenous people's rights, and development.

In today's Mandi linguistic usage, many terms related to local biodiversity are no longer used, as the lives the terms denote are no longer there -- they have disappeared or become extinct. Many words like sarengma rongthamben and dembra jagedong are used no longer in Mandi kusus (language). Instead, new words and ideas like BR-29, BR-11, Pajiam, IRRi have replaced them. The reason is that sarengma rongthamben and dembra jagedong(local jhum rice), all rice varieties, have disappeared

from Mandi lands.

Since 1995, I have conducted a number of surveys in Lawachhara and Magurchhara rainforests of Srimongol-Komolganj. Lawyachhara and Magurchhora are Khasi villages, and Dolubari is a Tripuri village. In 1996, I made a list of trees used by these indigenous peoples in all three villages. In the meantime, on June 14, 1997, Occidental was responsible for a blowout in the area.

A large part of the forestland was burnt in the flames, destroying the ecological balance of the forest. In 2004, I went there to make a list of trees again. This time I found that the new generation adolescents were no longer using the terms that describe or name the trees that disappeared from the area after the blowout. When I name a few which I could not find the second time but were there during my first survey, they said that they had not heard most of these names.

Then I discussed with the elders the linguistic changes within the Khashi (Mankhomer language family) and Kokborok (Tibetan-Berman family) languages of the locality. They told me that nobody remembers the names of trees that are no longer there. Libang, paichi boduk, kaichi boduk, masua phai, sokshuma, abithi were burned to ashes by the fire, and have become extinct in these villages. These names have gradually disappeared from the language commonly used by new generation adolescent Tripurians. Likewise, kraperda, kraseya, tiarman, kraking, chiral are not commonly used in Khashi language of the new generation.

Changes in local biodiversity directly influence the patterns of language structure. So far we have always overlooked this relationship in development initiatives and institutional policy processes regarding language. Destroying biodiversity is also destroying one's own language. Language is built around local biodiversity. When a language loses its matrilineal elements, it is bound to change in its matrilineal formation.

Once, in the rivers like Jadukata, Rokti, Kimao Maimadi (Nitai), Simsang (Someshwari) that flow from mountain streams of north-eastern Sunamganj-Netrokona near the borders of Meghalaya,



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mahashol fish (Tor tor) was found in abundance.

In haor areas, nanid fish (Labeo nandina) was also available, among many other fish varieties. We no longer have mahashol or nanid in our wetlands. In our language, concepts related to mahashol or nanid are altogether replaced by the ideas/names like silver-carp, grass-carp, miner-carp, African magur (exotic commercial fish species) etc.

It is difficult now to say how many rice varieties we had in our country. Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI) documented names of more than twelve thousand rice varieties in a book titled "Deshi Dhaner Jat" (Local Rice Varieties), published in 1982. All these rice varieties had an ethno-ecological relation with the languages developed from this land. Netpasha, somudrophena, kobrok, bajal, sadamota, beerpala, jamaiaduri, boaler dat, lokkhidigha, gallong, nuniya, gourakajol, gondhokosturi, lakhai, moynasail, chengri, digha, mi-khocchu, jotaibalam, guamouri, and a whole lot of other rice varieties, formed our concepts, indigenous knowledge and wisdom. The International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), CGIAR, so called

"Green Revolution," and corporate controlled world food system has changed the linguistic structure of our farmers by capturing or/and destroying inherited rice varieties. When we talk about agriculture or right to mother language, we tend to ignore this.

In the language space that sprung from the agro-biodiversity of plain land or jum cultivation, we witness now the intervention of chemical fertilizer-insecticide-pesticide-IRRI-HYV-hybrid-GMO food. In these circumstances, we want to attract everyone's attention to the deep-rooted relationship of our language with our ecology and biodiversity. Bhapa pitha, khir puli, malaikari, shondesh, sorshe ilish, godaiya, jau, khichuri, chedoh, khari, sorbot etc constitute our food culture.

But when McDonald's potato French fry, beef burger, Coca Cola, Pepsi or Pizza Hut's pizza occupy our language, it proposes new dimensions to our language. Then these pizzas become our language, and a violent corporate system enforces every means to inflict new elements, new items, new dimension into our language, suppressing the language that sprung from bhapa pitha.

And in this process of construc-

tion and transformation of a language, a woman is the most likely to be a linguistic refugee. Irrespective of whether she is from a dominant or marginalised section of people, the language of her livelihood springs from the historical relationship between local biodiversity and her society.

A woman is the first victim in the process of destruction of biodiversity by male-chauvinist corporate aggression. It's anti-ecological "commodity language" suppresses the language of woman, and makes an advertisement of it. We are told that this is also a form of language. But we believe that any exercise of force/violence, any process of alienation and destruction, cannot be a form of language. At best, it can be a communication tactics to promote global consumerism. It is not a language.

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On the one hand, right to mother language is recognised, while on the other, not enough initiatives are taken to protect the matrilineal elements and resources that construct that mother language. When a language loses its matrilineal elements, it can no longer be called a mother language. So, state initiative is an imperative, as the linguistic space and structure is dependent on the conservation of biodiversity.

An integrated mother language rights policy has to be formed, incorporating language, ecology, biodiversity and people's rights. It is not a unilateral or linear matter. Bangladesh has already adopted the United Nation's Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD 1992). Article 8(j) of the convention says, subject to national legislation, respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and promote their wider application with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge, innovations and practices, and encourage the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of such knowledge, innovations and practices.

In line with this convention, Bangladesh prepared a draft act in 1998 and updated in 2005. This draft act affirms that if any breeder, governmental or non-governmental, misappropriates the name of any plant variety traditionally used by farmers, the farmers will secure the right to demand cancellation or/and appropriate punishment. [Plant Variety Protection and Farmer's Right Act (draft) 2005/ Update Version]. We are yet to formulate a participatory integrated policy regarding language in our country.

Though we have a draft of a biodiversity policy, it is not yet finalised. Biodiversity, language, ecology are closely linked to one another. If the existence of one is threatened, the other two are equally affected. The state should include the subaltern dimension while considering the issues of language, biodiversity. The state has to create provision within its institutional framework for these marginalised people to express their pain of losing language or biodiversity.

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How will history remember the Blair era?

Gordon Brown, in many ways, is the antithesis of Tony Blair. He is serious not jovial, methodical rather than deft, and introverted, not extroverted. In his drive to become the next British prime minister, he conceded: "mistakes have been made" in the war in Iraq and predicted that "the emphasis will shift" from military action towards political reconciliation and economic development in the coming months. Brown's launching speech last week was clearly designed to draw a line between himself and Blair, his closest political ally, but also his fiercest rival.

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

AFTER months of speculation by the media, Tony Blair announced last Thursday that he would step down from the party leadership and British Prime Ministership on June 27, having been a decade in power. In a farewell speech to his followers at his home constituency in the northern election district, Blair maintained that "he did what he thought was right" and was confident that his country, despite "all its faults" and "myriad of unresolved problems and fresh challenges," would be "proud of its past and confident of its future."

How will history judge Blair, a remarkable, charismatic and bold leader, as the "British Clinton?" As a prodigy who revived a feckless Labour party, guided the British economic boom, oversaw profound social changes in a class-conscious nation, and restored multilingual London's status as a global financial center? Or, as an American poodle who sacrificed his immense popularity at home to join President Bush on the ill-fated US-led invasion of Iraq?

The Iraq war will largely taint his

otherwise remarkable achievements in Britain's political, economic and social arena. Blair's political calculations, which were so often correct in the first half of his rule, were utterly wrong on the Iraq invasion, and ultimately isolated him from his people and brought down his approval numbers.

Why Blair joined this senseless war will intrigue historians for decades. Furthermore, the Iraq war, fought at an enormous human and material cost, has created new divides between Britain and its traditional European allies and friends.

However, in all fairness, Blair must be credited for moving Britain forward in ways that other European leaders never did. Britain's economy and image improved remarkably compared to France and Germany. In fact, the newly elected Nicolas Sarkozy won the presidential campaign largely on Blair-style promises of sweeping reforms to boost the moribund French economy.

In foreign policy, Blair, despite his serious miscalculations on Iraq, was quite effective. He was in the forefront on the war against the Al Qaeda militants in Afghanistan, and

sent troops to Kosovo and Sierra Leone to stop killings and remove ruthless rulers.

He was the prime mover of the G-8 leaders' decision to write off debts of African least developed countries to the tune of about \$ 50 billion, and the European leaders' decision to grant duty free and quota free access to LDC products to EU markets. Along with the outgoing French president Chirac, he had initiated the move to raise a European army to reduce their total dependence on Nato forces.

Even last week he reached a power sharing deal in Northern Ireland with a view to ending the strife there. On the international scene, he had consistently made an effort to forcefully project British power and ideals.

He made no secret of his belief in military power "to reorder the world," as he once put it. Yes, his firm and prompt response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US and his role in the war against the Al Qaeda terrorists in Afghanistan were supported by his people, but they became rather skeptical when he enthusiastically joined the US led invasion of Iraq. Blair could neither explain the rationale for the Iraq war to them,



nor could he explain the link between the 9/11 attacks and the Iraq war.

Before handing over power to his successor, almost certainly the Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, Blair intends to attend the EU and International Summit Meetings in June, undertake official trips to France, Africa

and the United States, and also push forward some important bills through the Parliament.

At home, Blair substantially improved British public health, education and transportation systems so that they could at least keep pace with the growing demands. The financial disciplines pushed by Thatcher and successive Tory



Governments have been softened on social justice. His enlightened stands on same sex marriage, climate change, and even on fox hunting, have been widely appreciated.

In his farewell speech last week, Blair said: "there is only one government since 1945 that can say all of the following: more jobs, fewer

unemployed, better health and education results, lower crime, and economic growth every quarter, this one."

His political rivals, the Tories, assailed his record on public services and credibility. "There has been so much spin in that, the word of government is less believed than at any other time," said William

Hague, the conservative foreign affairs spokesman. Nonetheless, though Iraq will continue to haunt his record, future historians just cannot overlook Blair's achievements.

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Brown's launching speech last week was clearly designed to draw a line between himself and Blair, his closest political ally, but also his fiercest rival. He took joint credit for the achievements of the decade long Labour government. At the same time, he distanced himself from Blair's Iraq policy which had brought down the latter's popularity.

Experts say Brown will maintain "special ties" with Washington, but he will be reluctant to support the ongoing Iraq war, though he may not go for a rapid British pullout. He gave a broad hint last week that he would be "Governing in a different way," and would like to involve and engage people to meet the newer challenges that his country faces. What he ultimately does in reality is another story.

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