Sociolinguistic Studies

ISSN: 1750-8649 (print)
ISSN: 1750-8657 (online)

Review

Voices from the Lost Horizon: Stories and Songs of the Great Adamanese

Anvita Abbi (2021)

New Delhi: Niyogi Books. Pp. 176
ISBN: 978-93-91125-06-6 (pbk)

Reviewed by S. Imtiaz Hasnain

Until the 1990s, India was said to have five language families, viz., Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman, and Tai Kadai. Linguistic research in 2003, however, identified a sixth language family known as the Great Andamanese of the Andaman Islands. Historically, Great Andamanese was initially considered an 'isolate' (Basu, 1955). Manoharan (1983) called it a 'koiné' or 'mixed' language since it derives its lexical resources from the four northern languages: Khora, Sare, Bo, and Jeru. Blevins (2007) categorised Onge-Jarawa as 'Ongan' within Austronesian. This categorisation was, however, strongly contested by Blust (2014). Later, Abbi established the typological and genealogical distinction of Jarawa-Onge from Great Andamanese, which finds corroboration in geneticists' findings that the speakers of these two languages group belong to two separate haplogroups, M31 and M32, respectively (Thangaraj, Chaubey, Kivisild, Reddy, Singh, Rasalkar, and Singh, 2005). Great Andamanese constitutes the sixth language family of India (Abbi, 2003, 2006, 2009), although historically, it is arguably the oldest (Abbi, 2018). All six language families are genealogically, typologically, and historically distinct.

Voices from the Lost Horizon by Anvita Abbi brings in indigenous stories and songs of the last speakers of Great Andamanese in a way that clearly alludes to the postcolonial engagement of a researcher. She engages with the participating partners neither with a sense of generosity, benevolence, superiority, and arrogance nor with a feel of philanthropy to 'raise communities to a more

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SOLS VOL 18.1–2 2024 255–260 https://doi.org/10.1558/sols.23503
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modern (Western) standard of living' (Jefferes, 2008, cited in Larkin, 2013: 35). This emerges from the ways in which the indigenous stories and their world-view that privileges reciprocity, collaboration, spirituality, and humility have been allowed to exist independently of the hegemonised cultural space and the Western notions of dichotomous thinking, individualism, and rationality. Hence, at no point does the narration of the stories or rendition of the songs make the experience identifiable with the higher civilisation and modern standard of Western intellectuals.

Even in her discovery of the sixth language family in India, Abbi does not display any sense of superiority nor engage in any kind of victory celebration. The discovery has symbolically given a sense of belonging to the speakers of these languages and the feeling that they belong to a language family. It has also lent a voice to the voiceless which can be considered an inherent right of all peoples. In fact, the right to speak their language is the most integral of rights of the aboriginal or indigenous groups and yet remains the most ignored. Quite often, terms like 'tribal', 'aboriginal' or 'indigenous' are interchangeably used in endangered language studies. While 'tribal' is widely used to refer to a certain category of people displaying loyalty to a tribal group and sharing common ancestors, culture, beliefs, customs, and traditions, terms like 'aboriginal' or 'indigenous' refer to members of the original inhabitants of a particular place or region. In the Indian context, the aboriginal ethnic groups are called 'Scheduled Tribes'.

The aboriginal people and aboriginal languages are still destined to oblivion. Despite these languages being sacred to their people, there are indications of such neglect and/or ignorance of them, and the cultural and societal practices of the aboriginals, which is evident from the recent publication by Bloomsbury (2020) titled *Keywords for India: A Conceptual Lexicon for the 21st Century* by Rukmini Bhaya Nair and Peter Roland deSouza. In many of the tribal languages, there are a number of cultural words which embody a value system about how the speakers of tribal language give names to relations among kin, to loss through death among family members, etc., for which English or any other non-tribal languages have no words.

Voices from the Lost Horizon represents an important publication demonstrating tangible commitment and sensitivity to the vulnerabilities as well as that of hope of the great Andamanese community. The Andaman Islands consisting of Great Andaman, Little Andaman, and the North Sentinel islands have for centuries have been home to the tribes of the Great Andamanese, Onge, Jarawa, and Sentinelese whose languages are also called after the respective places they came from. Abbi writes that the Great Andamanese is a generic term

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encompassing 10 languages within it, once spoken by ten tribes living in the north, south, and middle of the Great Andaman Islands. However, Present-Day Great Andamanese (PGA), is a mixture of four northern varieties of the Great Andamanese languages, i.e., Jeru, Khora, Bo, and Sare. The grammar of the language is based on Jeru.

Abbi's work highlights the interrelationship between the language of a community and its history, culture, ecological base, etc., stating that the near extinction of a language poses a threat to the very survival of that community. Therefore, preserving one's linguistic tradition and language is of utmost importance. This desperate need to protect the language of the Great Andamanese community is reflected in the following statement made by Boa Sr., "Don't let the language slip away, keep a hold on it" (p. 9). Along with Nao Jr., Boa Sr. were two speakers of Great Andamanese who helped the researcher in the collection of her stories and songs for the present work under review. The result of their conversation is this brilliant collection of 10 stories and 46 songs.

This collection emerged from the project, conducted by Anvita Abbi and her small team of research students from Jawaharlal Nehru University (India) in 2005, to study and document Great Andamanese, an endangered language spoken by no more than eight elderly people in a tribal community resettled on Strait Island, not too far from Port Blair. These were speakers of four languages, Khora, Bo, Jeru and Sare, languages which had once been spoken on North Andaman Island. While the grammar, compilation of a dictionary, and short stories and songs were well documented, the avowed aim of revisiting the project was to recheck the formal linguistic data for validation. In the process, stories and songs were recorded by the last speakers who had not used the language for a very long time. Soon after her work was done, the last two speakers she depended on passed away, marking the end of a language that had come with the first migration from Africa 70,000 years ago and had lived in seclusion on the island ever since.

The book provides a joyous reading of stories and songs that came after the trials and tribulations of bureaucracy and arduous breathtaking adventures, which involved negotiating the dangerous company of crocodiles and snakes –adventures that, according to the author, turned her and her team 'into hunters and gatherers ourselves' (p. 28). Each story and song in the book are woven with an ante-story which sets the context and setting for the stories and songs. Though very brief, each song represents the harmonious relationship between the aboriginal people and their surroundings. Every line echoes their attachment to nature and the sense of bliss they experience in its proximity. This will become clear from one of the following Bo songs Abbi mentions (p. 123):

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Clean, clean the place,
Dance, dance, dance, dance!
Clean, clean the place,
Dance, dance, dance, dance!

Similarly, all the stories narrated in this collection also contain references to, among others, the forces of nature, birds, animals, and tribal gods. Abbi informs us how these stories and songs have been elicited and recorded and also provides QR codes that can be scanned by the readers to hear what they sounded like. To make her work more appealing to young readers and upcoming linguists, Abbi has included numerous coloured photographs and illustrations like the instruments they play while singing, the clothes they wear, or providing a glimpse of their daily chores. As Peter Burke (2008: 9) points out in his work, 'images should not be considered mere reflections of their time and place, but rather extensions of the social contexts in which they were produced'. The visual and the oral medium of the preservation of traditional knowledge systems is a powerful and effective means which the author of the present work has successfully used in her fascinating work.

Creation stories of common origin, rituals, songs, customs, myths, and other cultural practices are the social and cultural capital that the indigenous people possessed for generations. They construct group identity and lend a sense of groupness and interconnectedness. They form the essence of tribal epistemology, which has been continually transmitted through the oral tradition. But these are steadily losing ground because of the loss of their languages. The social and cultural capital that they possessed just one generation ago is lost to the people of the present generation of Great Andamanese who have 'never heard any story from their elders neither in their heritage language nor in Andamani Hindi [...]. The loss of a mother tongue has very serious implications as the very genre of narration has been lost [...]" (Abbi, Som, and Das, 2007: 327).

Abbi's choice of songs operates as a linguistic genre. This is remarkable since it connects with the Andamanese way of life, their aboriginal customs and traditions. In other words, if this genre was missing, the reader would have been deprived of having access to a window of the Andamenese worldview, for it would have otherwise not been possible to observe the intimate connection between cultural facts and the songs conveying the rich linguistic basis of storytelling.

Inasmuch as storytelling is a practice in indigenous cultures that sustains communities and validates the experiences and epistemologies of indigenous peoples, stories should be taken as a basic foundation of all human learning and

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teaching (Cajete, 1994). These are valuable collections; hence, they need to be included in the curriculum so that the study of the lived experiences of these tribes and their rich culture (as well as an emphasis on its preservation) can become a part of the mainstream academia. Moreover, it would also be very useful, especially to the linguists as well as to those readers interested in learning about the linguistic traditions and overall culture of the aboriginal communities if such oral narratives – folk songs and stories are further contextualised, therefore highlighting their sociocultural ethos and way of life.

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(Received 7th July 2022; accepted 28th February 2023)

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.23503 - Wednesday, February 18, 2026 12:55:13 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80