

Revisiting the mother tongues of the De-Notified tribes in India

Digambar Ghodke¹

Abstract: A considerable discussion is going on the human rights of certain itinerant groups. With the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, a concern related to the vanishing voices of the deprived sections should also haunt the minds of the think-tank. The present article is an attempt to perceive the mother tongues (MTs) spoken by various groups from the de-notified tribes (DNTs) in India, the itinerant groups of people who have always been looked down upon by sedentary communities for their unsettled and deviating life style. After having analyzed the official reports available and also observing the general linguistic behaviour of the DNTs, the study argues that our perception of the MTs of these groups has been predetermined by the reports of the erstwhile British colonial officials hence there is a need to revisit and describe them afresh. The study claims that the languages spoken either by the well-off or underprivileged groups of the society have their own peculiarities and ‘creative systems’ so they need to be understood objectively.

Introduction

While the issue of survival of certain itinerant groups *per se* has not been well-addressed yet, to talk about their linguistic rights might seem too ludicrous. A considerable discussion is going on the human rights of such groups. With the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, a concern related to the vanishing voices of the deprived sections should also haunt the minds of the think-tank. The question whether to accord the status of language to the mother tongues (MTs) of certain itinerant groups is still a matter unsettled. De-notified and Nomadic Tribes (DNTs) in India are the itinerant groups of people who have always been looked down upon by sedentary communities for their unsettled and deviating life style. With the enactment of the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871, these so called criminal classes, being subdued in the social stratum, were never treated as human beings. Likewise their languages too were distorted and deformed. The languages spoken by the DNTs did not remain the system of sounds anymore; rather they became a shrieking noise, a view being upheld till date. The members of these groups, for the ostensible civilized people, did not speak at all; indeed they sent the signals just like animals and birds as the ethnographic record of the period maintain that the members from the DNTs used a corrupt form of some or other dominant regional language (see Michael Kennedy 1908; Edgar Thurston 1909; Nanjundayya & Iyer 1931). The study is highly qualitative in nature. The participant observation method was used here for data collection. It includes analysis of the official reports/documents of the erstwhile British officials, mostly police officials who prepared these reports as a part of the survey of the criminal tribes in pre-independent India, the description of the languages/ MTs of the DNTs in Ethnologue and observation of the linguistic behavior of the people from the select communities which are categorized as DNTs in India. Although not satisfactory but more or less discussion over the lifestyle, customs, culture and traditions of the

DNTs has taken place in certain ethnographic studies undertaken by the British officials of the time, there is scarcely any discussion on the MTs of the DNTs.

The main argument and structure of the paper

The central contention of the present paper is that the perception of the MTs of DNTs at present has been predetermined by the reports of the colonizers and also by the attitude of the socio-economically dominant groups; hence, there is a need to revisit and describe them afresh shedding the sedentary chauvinism. It claims that the languages spoken either by the well-off or underprivileged groups of the society have their own peculiarities and 'creative systems' so they need to be understood objectively. The first section of the paper discusses the theoretical base of the study with reference to the views of Jack Goody (2006), James Scot (2009) and Gilles Deleuze (2010). The second section covers the historical background of these so called criminal tribes, as they are still ignominiously addressed, in the socio-cultural context of Maharashtra, India by referring, specifically, to the reports of the British officials of the erstwhile British India. The third section tries to identify the languages (which have not been considered languages at all due to the prejudiced perception of these speakers) spoken by these members for the intra-group communication; a discussion over the issue of language maintenance and language shift among these tribes and the factors responsible for it will also form the core of this section. An attempt to focus on the linguistic features of select languages from these groups to establish their connection with the major language families will also be made in the fifth part of the paper. For example, Waddar, a Dravidian, South-Central language is a closely related language to Telugu (Ethnologue).

'Civilized' and 'uncivilized': A binary opposition

The discussion of Goody's (2006) views on the great narratives of civilization, Scott's (2009) views on the state's notion of modernity and Deleuze's (2010) notion of 'nomadology' might be helpful here to provide a theoretical base to the present study. All these thinkers underline the tendency of dividing the world into 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' on the basis of the conceptualized views of the dominant groups. Goody in his *The Theft of History* (2006) refers to the takeover of history by the west. Past, in his view, is 'conceptualized', 'presented' and 'imposed' upon the rest of the world by the Europeans. Correspondingly, the great narratives of the civilization across the world encompass only those cultures and lifestyles which fit into the trajectory (framework) of the sedentary notion of society. Digression from this preset, dogged and recognized notion of human civilization became the mark of barbarity, crudity and savagery. An exclusion of certain people or groups of people from the pages of history for their peculiar cultures and occupations seem to have resulted from the binary opposition between 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' and also from the capitalist mercenary outlook of the settled cultures. The groups who denied abandoning their mobility and ambulatory practices and submerging themselves into the popular conceptualized civilization became (were treated) the subject to vandalism and were abandoned as 'criminals' by the sedentary cultures. Scott (2009) uses the term 'non-state spaces' to refer to these groups who reject to accommodate with 'civilization' and the state's notion of 'modernity', 'development' and 'progress'. To take account of this vagrant, itinerant and peripatetic groups in history, Deleuze (2010) suggests an alternate opposite version of history which he calls as "nomadology". The implication of the inevitability of studying the nomads - their cultures, social systems, and languages - with the goal of reframing historiography is evident in Deleuze's notion of "nomadology". Nomads, in India, is a group of communities who travel from place to place for their livelihood include

salt traders, fortune-tellers, conjurers, healers, jugglers, acrobats, story tellers, snake charmers, animal doctors, tattooists, grindstone makers, or basket makers. These groups can be broadly divided into three categories: hunter gatherers, pastoralists and the peripatetic.

Analysis and findings

Review of the documents on DNTs in India

The present section is the review of the documents and views available. Rana (2011) in his article refers to nomads as “the different categories of the mobile population having internal differentiations and hierarchies and yet who cling to each other due to their multiple similarities”. He further argues that nomadism as a phenomenon is ‘a sub-culture’ or ‘a counterculture’ and ‘an alternate lifestyle’ that subverts and challenges ‘great tradition’. In his view, the nomads did not want to be part of the state’s superstructure, its oppressive model and multiple divisive hierarchies. The geographical, historical, cultural and social dislocation of the ‘Wandering tribes’ is the outcome of this fondness of the nomads towards the itinerant lifestyle (Rana 2011). The commonality in life, habits and culture among the ethnic groups of the nomads is phenomenal especially in India. Of these nomadic tribes, more than 150 were branded as criminals by birth under the Criminal Tribe Act, 1871 of the British India (Dilip D’Souza 2001).

The inhuman act of the erstwhile British government of India passed in 1871 to declare certain tribes as criminals by birth has proved to be a causative factor in the process of dehumanizing these groups discursively, symbolically and physically and unfortunately in continuing it till date. The society had never treated them as ‘humans’ and to substantiate this age old social atrocity the state too seems to have come to its help: born-untouchable² were some already and now there were the groups who became born criminals by this act. The introducer of this bill in 1871 and a British jurist, T. V. Stephens, in his despicable and illogical oversimplification mentioned below, supported it. He argued:

[...] people from time immemorial have been pursuing the caste system defined job-positions: weaving, carpentry and such were hereditary jobs. So there must have been hereditary criminals also who pursued their forefathers’ profession (D’Souza 2001).

To crush down the possible threat of social crime from these groups, the Criminal Tribes Act (Act XXVII of 1871) was first, under the pretext of legislation, enacted in 1871 during the British rule as a part of its coercive mission. This strategic law, illogical might it appear to those who hold the similar prejudice against these tribes even today, was the part of the British government’s calculated step to appease the sedentary communities by ensuring them security from the so called ‘criminal tribes’, who were the victims of social prejudices on account of their itinerant and vagrant lifestyle from time immemorial (and still they are) to take hold of the nation unopposed (cf. Rajnarayan Chandavarkar 1998 and D’Souza 2001). Indeed the conservative elites of princely India and the big landholders were to prove increasingly useful allies while the tribal groups were creating an impediment in the way of establishing the British Raj smoothly. There are references to tribal resistance to the British rule in India. In Maharashtra, for instance, the hill tribes offered stiff resistance to the British rule. *Kolis*³ (1785-86), *Bhils*⁴ (1809-28), *Ramoshis*⁵ (1826-27), and many other tribal people revolted against the rule of the East India Company. The Act ostensibly, as Radhakrishna (2001) states, proposed the maintenance of law and order but to convert hundreds of peripatetic communities into wage workers was the target at the deeper level. Delimiting its ratification initially to North India mostly, in 1879 Bengal Presidency and other areas were also brought under the Act; extending its purview as per the Amendment of 1911, Madras Presidency was also covered under this brutal law. The Act went through several amendments in the next

decade and finally the Criminal Tribes Act (VI of 1924) incorporated all of other parts of India.

The officials of the British government defended the need of CTA (1911 Amendment) by putting forth following argument (objectives):

- (1) To safeguard the rights of society against the anti-social influences.
- (2) The reformation of the criminal tribes: in the early stages against the wills of these members (D'Souza 2001).

Ganesh Devy in his foreword to D'Souza's book *Branded by Law Looking at India's De-notified Tribes* (2001) states:

If prejudice is a common human instinct, state-sponsored prejudice can spell disaster for humanity. Fascism is one form of it. The 'criminalization' of a large number of communities is another. In India this criminalization of communities is credited by historians to British colonial rule [...] the colonial administration in India displayed its profound ignorance of India's social structure and cultural institutions by formulating a series of Criminal Tribes Acts, beginning with the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, and turned a large number of nomadic communities and artists into criminals.

Thus, Devy's remarks regarding the criminalization of these communities focus on the ignorance of the social system and misconception about these communities and the people. The roots of dehumanizing the nomads and artisans were not only in Indian social system but also in the CTA introduced by the erstwhile British government of India.

Historical displacement and distortion of the tribal people

Mahasweta Devi in her foreword to Meena Radhakrishnan's *Dishonoured by History: "criminal Tribes" and British Colonial Policy* (2001) writes:

Since the history of India has always been written by historians who were still reluctant to see the tribes as a part of India, a true history is yet to be written which will give the tribes their place in history. The historians are generally oblivious of their existence. If this is the situation, it is quite expected that they do not know that the denotified tribes exist.

It is a harsh reality that most of these communities are still 'non-existent' for the government and the society in general. Their poverty, agonies and hardships are simply neglected. The studies concerned with the history of these 'wandering tribes' often take the year 1871 as a starting point as if these communities and people never existed before and the sociological, anthropological and ethnographic studies conducted by the British officers such as M. Kennedy (1907 and 1985), E. Thurston (1909), W. Cook (1896), R. V. Russell (1916) with the assistance of the Indian officials of the British Government also seems to have been written with the purpose of supporting the government's verdict to enact the CTA as their works on the tribes and castes in India mostly give the intentional minutiae of the dirty, filthy and vagrant lifestyle, eating habits and social living of these nomadic tribes and illustrate their methods of burglary with prolific fantasy like the *Arabian Nights* stories.

Languages of the DNTs

Every subgroup of DNTs has its own distinct language for family and intra-group communication. There is a need to undertake a wide-scale research to understand the distinct linguistic features of these MTs to decide their status as distinct languages or else the tendency to discard them merely codes or dialects will continue.

Table 1: Languages of the DNTs in India

	Name of DNT	MT	Remarks
1.	Berad (also known as Bedars, Byaderu, Talvarru and Naikra-Makalru)	Beradi	Berads speak impure Kannada or Marathi (1908:13)
2.	Bhamta (Ghantichors, Uchlias, Khisa-katrus, Takaris, Vadaris, Kalwadru, Tudugwadru, and Pathruts)	Waddari	Bhamptas speak a corrupt language called 'Waddari' or debased form of Telugu (1908:23)
3.	Kaikadi (Korwas, Korchas, and Pamlors)	Kaikadi	They speak corrupt Telegu or Arvi (1908:69)
4.	Banjara (Vanjaris, Brinjaris, Lamans, Lambanis, and Lambadis)	Gormati	They have a peculiar dialect Their dialect is called 'Banjari' which resembles Marwadi and contains some Hindustani and Marathi words (1908:5)
5.	Pal Paradhi and Raj Pardhi (Takaris or Takenkars, Phas-Pardhis, LangotiPardhis, Haranshikaris, Advichanchers and Chigri-batgirs)	Paradhi	The Pardhi's home language is a corrupt guttural mixture of dialects in which Gujerati predominates. It has a strong family likeness 'Baori-bhasha.' (1908:137)
6.	Rajput Bhamta (in some districts as PardeshiBhamptas)	–	They speak Hindustani (1908:35)
7.	Ramoshi	Ramoshi	They speak Marathi of the lower orders. The dialect spoken by Holgahs is Marathi sprinkled with Canarese words. (1908:145)
8.	Waddar (1908: 166)	Waddar	Among themselves Waddars speak the corrupt form of Telugu. (1908:168)
9.	Waghari (also known as Baghris)	Waghari	They speak a dialect resembling corrupt Gujerati which however the average Gujerati cannot easily understand. (1908: 155-158)
10.	Chhapparband (Fakir coiners)	–	They speak a dialect of their own akin to Hindustani. Like other wandering criminal classes, they have a jargon of their own (1908: 53)

The list of DNTs and their MTs, with the negative and biased remarks of the British Officials, in *Notes on Criminal Tribes in the Bombay Presidency* (1908), the report of M. Kennedy, Deputy Inspector-General of Police, Railways and Criminal Investigation, Bombay Presidency, is given in the table above. The information in Table 1 illustrates that most of the MTs spoken by the DNTs are named after the tribe. Besides, we notice that the remarks made about their MTs are influenced by the perspectives of the British police officers, who always looked at these tribes as criminal classes. The phrases such as ‘debased form’, ‘corrupt form’, etc. imply the non-linguist perspective to understand any language. The perspective of the privileged groups towards DNTs and their MTs is also biased and highly depressing. The MTs of the DNTs are still a matter of laughter for the people from privileged and dominant groups.

MTs and their classification

Being in use as a means of verbal communication, for several generations, the MTs of the DNTs have certain linguistic features which might be explored on both paradigmatic and syntagmatic axis. Rather than discarding them simply as the corrupt versions of other major languages, the creative aspect, one of the major features of any natural language, needs to be perceived. It is, of course, in the absence of diachronic data, difficult to understand the changes they have undergone but the synchronic studies in apparent time will certainly help understand these linguistic changes. Here is an attempt to put forth the classification of the few of MTs.

- (I) **Kaikadi (kep)**: This is the mother tongue, being named after the speech community, spoken by the nomadic Kaikadi community. As per the previous studies undertaken by the British officials the Kaikadi’s speak corrupt Telugu or Arvi but Ethnologue (2009) classifies it as Dravidian, Southern, Tamil-Kannada, Tamil-Kodagu, Tamil-Malayalam, Tamil. The number of speakers, who are mainly found in Maharashtra and Karnataka, is 23,700 (Census 2001). Ethnologue categorises it in 6a for its being an unstandardized language which is in vigorous use among all generations.
- (II) **Lambadi (lmb)**: It is the MT claimed by 4,150,000 (2001 census) members, Lambadi is also known as Bangala, Banjara, Banjari, Banjori, Banjuri, Brinjari, Gohar-Herkeri, Goola, Gormati, Gurmarti, Kora, Labhani, LabhaniMuka, Lamadi, Lamani, Lambani, Lambara, Lavani, Lemadi, Lumadale, Singali, Sugali, Sukali, Tanda, Vanjari, Wanji. The speech community is found in Andhra Pradesh; Madhya Pradesh; Himachal Pradesh; Gujarat; Tamil Nadu; Maharashtra; Karnataka; Odisha; West Bengal. As per the Ethnologue report, the language is in vigorous use, with literature in a standardized form being used by some though this is not yet widespread or sustainable. Being unclassified, ethnologue describes it as Indo-European, Indo-Iranian, Indo-Aryan, Central zone, Rajasthani language.

Table 2: *Lexical Features of Lambadi*

	Marwari/Gujarati	Gloss	Banjara
1.	kəɾnu/kəɾum	do	kəɾni
2.	khaunəu/khuəm	eat	kha:ni
3.	ɕævnəʊ/ɕæv	go	pəɾdʒo
4.	su:nnəu/səmbɦa:lɪvum	hear	səmba:lɪ
5.	vefɲəʊ/vefævəm	sell	ji:ɲnək
6.	ðɦʊo/mokɑ:lɔ	send	mɛlɔɑ

- (III) **Waddar (wbq)**: Waddar (abbreviated as ‘wbq’ in Ethnologue 2009) a Dravidian, South-Central language and closely related to Telugu is spoken by the Waddar community, one of the de-notified tribes in India. Found mostly in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Maharashtra and with varying numbers in some other states of India, the speech community is reportedly seen in Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka as well (cf. Ethnologue 2009). The population of Waddar community is 172,000 as per the 2001 census. While describing the language status in its EGIDS (Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale), Ethnologue categorises it under 6a i.e. vigorous in use for face to face communication among all generations but it should have categorised under 6b as Waddar language is fast losing its speakers.

Table 3: *Lexical Features of Waddar*

	Telugu	Gloss	Waddar
1.	konugōlu	to buy	konukneḍ
2.	ḍigipōvaḍam	to descend	ḍigeḍ
3.	veḷaḍāniki	to go	pojeḍ
4.	rābōjē	to come	vəṭṭeḍ
5.	māṭlāḍeṭam	to speak	māṭlāḍeḍ
6.	telavārusamayam	dawn	nəsək

- (IV) **Paradhi (pcl)**: Paradhi is a Scheduled Tribe in Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, and a Scheduled Caste in Madhya Pradesh. Its alternate names are Bahelia, Chita Pardhi, LangoPardhi, Paidia, Paradi, Paria, Phans Pardhi, Takankar, Takia. As per Ethnologue, Paradhi abbreviated as pcl is an Indo-European, Indo-Iranian, Indo-Aryan, Central zone, Bhil language. It is spoken in the Solapur, Satara, Sangli, and Kolhapur districts of Maharashtra; in the Bijapur and Belgaum districts of Karnataka; and widely scattered in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. The other varieties or dialects of Paradhi are known as Haran Shikari, Neelishikari, Pittala Bhasha, Takari. As per the census 2001, the population of the community is 49,300. While describing the language status in its EGIDS, Ethnologue categorises it under 6a.

Deformation of tribal languages

The distorted representation of these nomadic cultures (See Table 1) continues in the outlook of the colonial officials towards the languages used by these tribes in these depictions revealing the bias in their minds. The perception reveals that the people of these tribes opened their mouths only for deception; they never needed the heritage languages for their family or in-group communication. Thus, these languages were treated as simply sign languages used to betray people or the corrupt varieties of the dominant languages. ‘Non-beings’ and ‘non-persons’ (Rana 2011) were they already in the view of the dominant communities and their languages too were ‘non-languages’, merely set of obnoxious signs. M. Kennedy, for instance, while talking about the language of Pardhis, writes:

Pardhi’s home language is a corrupt guttural mixture of dialects in which Gujerati predominates. As a rule they talk very loud and in the presence of strangers in Hindustani (1985:137).

Similar were his opinions related to the languages of many other tribes: ‘they are either corrupt or they talk in an irritating manner’. Milind Bokil, a Marathi writer and a sociologist by

profession in his special article on the DNTs in EPW (2002) stresses on the need for research in the genetic mapping of nomadic communities in India. In his view, there is a lack of endeavor to ascertain the physical affinities between different nomadic communities in India to understand the missing links. He also thinks that the study of the historical dislocation of the DNTs is also neglected even in subaltern studies. Thus, the need of time is embarking serious endeavors in the field of sociology, anthropology, ethnography, demography and historiography to understand these communities otherwise these groups, as they always have been, will remain at the margin.

Language maintenance and language Shift

Owing to the correlation between language and identity, the speakers often feel either proud or ashamed of using their heritage languages in day-to-day communication. This positive or negative attitude towards one's own language is the result of social, political and especially economic factors. For example, the economic motivation is a major factor in the spread of English in India and other parts of the world. However, the importance of social and political factors in the safeguarding of the language cannot be neglected. Most of the languages of the socio-politically dominant groups, either majority or minority, have sustained despite their economic insignificance while the languages of the underprivileged groups are leading towards extinction. While referring to the views of Grenoble and Whaley (1998), Nettle and Romaine (2000), Anju Saxena (2006) expresses the view that the term language shift refers to a situation where the use of a language is replaced by the use of another (usually a social-economic or numerically dominant language). The end product of language shift is a complete replacement, or language death, but it is normally a gradual process, where a shift in progress can affect a language in terms of the number of its speakers, the functional domains in which it is used and the degree of competence in the language (2006). During the study it was noticed that with upward social mobility and acceptance of sedentary life language shift is becoming a prominent strategy used by the DNTs, especially the educated ones. This shift is occurring through the bilingual behavior of the second generation speakers. Although the Ethnologue, owing to the vigorous use of the languages of DNTs among the uneducated and underprivileged groups, categorizes most of these languages under 6a in EGIDS, it is a harsh reality that new generations, especially educated ones, are unwilling to continue with their heritage languages as they are the key indicators of their ethnic identity.

Conclusion

The roots of the tendency towards language shift among the DNTs lie in the lack of will to learn and teach these languages. But it should be understood that no language is 'inherently deficient or illogical'. Rather, the socio-cultural conditions of language use and the inequalities between languages propagate the misconception that some languages are 'substandard'. If the speakers of a marginalized language are kept out of the State's domains of power, education, trade and commerce for long, then it becomes difficult for them to maintain their language and, consequently, language shift becomes inescapable fact for these groups. Linguistic and cultural diversity should be understood as a key to the "promotion of democracy". Eventually, the present study is an attempt to draw the attention of policy makers and linguists towards these MTs which also might be considered for linguistic description and studies. It suggests that there is a need to think over the possibilities of sustenance and safe-guarding these languages which might otherwise vanish with time on account of the unwillingness of the speakers themselves to use their MTs for their family or intra-group communication or transmit them to their next generations.

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Notes

¹Mr Digambar M. Ghodke is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English in S.N. Arts, D. J. M. Commerce and B. N. S. Science College, Sangamner, Dist: Ahmednagar (Maharashtra, India). He has been teaching English Language and Literature at both UG and PG levels for last 12 yrs. At present, he is pursuing his Ph.D. in sociolinguistics Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune, India. He has also worked on the UGC sponsored minor research project on English for Rural Students. Besides, he is one of the recipients of British Council's ELTReP, 2013. Mr Ghodke has presented 11 papers at various international conferences/seminars and published 12 papers in international journals, books and conference proceedings.

²This is with reference to the caste system in India wherein the people from certain so called lower castes were treated as 'untouchables' i.e. they were segregated from the mainstream by social custom.

³An ethnic group native to Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana states in India.

⁴The aboriginal population found in the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan in India.

⁵An Indian community found largely in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Karnataka.