

## **The Genesis and Formation of a People's Movement for Safe-guarding and Revitalization of Languages in India**

This presentation seeks to outline the genesis of a major grass-roots movement in India aimed at safe-guarding and revitalization of the marginalized languages, many of them rapidly moving towards extinction. The movement was initiated by the Baroda based Bhasha Research Centre. *Bhasha* in most Indian languages means 'language', 'voice' or 'definition'. Bhasha was established in Baroda in 1996 with a view to battling the erosion of *bhashas* and for conservation of oral traditions in the *bhashas* of marginalized communities. The initial work of Bhasha was with the Bhilli group of languages in western India. When the efforts resulted in a marked improvement in some of the Bhilli-group languages, Bhasha decided to undertake work with a large number of speech-communities across the country. In the Census Reports of 1961, a total of 1652 'mother tongues' were mentioned. Several hundred of these are no longer traceable. During the first half of the twentieth century, India reportedly lost about one fifth of its languages, during the second half of the last century India seems to have lost about one third of the remaining languages. If this alarming rate of extinction continues unchecked, it is likely that over the next fifty years the country will see the extinction of most of the *bhashas* spoken by the nomadic communities and the indigenous adivasis, just as it shall witness a large scale erosion of some of the main *bhashas* that have a rich history of written literature. In March 2010, Bhasha Centre held a 'Confluence of Languages' consultation at Baroda with a view to taking up the work of preparing a People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI). The *People's Linguistic Survey of India* is the first known democratic intellectual attempt undertaken by a collective of nearly 3000 scholars and activists. It is carried out by volunteers and associates mobilized and trained through a series of workshops. So far nearly 130 workshops have been held in 35 States and Union Territories of India resulting into a 50 volume series, running to 35000 printed pages and mapping 780 languages. All this work was done as a non-funded and voluntary work, except for a very small grant representing less than 1 per cent of the Indian government's projection. The People's Linguistic Survey of India has been a right based movement for carrying out a nation wide survey to identify, document and understand the state of Indian languages, especially languages of fragile nomadic, coastal, island and forest communities. It was carried out by scholars, writers and activists in partnership with members of different speech

communities. The main objectives of the PLSI have been to provide an overview of the living languages of India as 'they are' by 2011-2012; to create an action network of members committed to sustainable development, irrespective of diverse social and cultural contexts, and of community custodians of life enhancing systems and traditions; to build bridges among diverse language communities, and thereby to strengthen the foundations of multilingual, multicultural Indian society; to create closer links between the government and speech communities, and to bring the universal developmental strategies of the government in harmony with ecologically and culturally diverse communities; to develop teaching material and capability for promoting education in mother tongue; to provide a baseline for any future survey of India's linguistic and cultural composition; to arrest extinction of linguistic, cultural and biological diversity, nurtured by speech communities over generation, and to protect one of the few surviving bastions of linguistic diversity in the world in the interest of human security and survival. The PLSI is a quick, non-hierarchical, public consultation and appraisal, intended as an aid to cultural impact assessment of development, and as an acknowledgement of the self-respect and sense of identity of all, especially the endangered speech communities of India. The PLSI is guided by the National Editorial Collective constituted voluntarily. This presentation will attempt to describe the micro-processes that went into the creation and execution of the PLSI.