

Humane Face of Language Documentation: A Great Andamanese Experience

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Great Andamanese people are the last survivors of Pre-Neolithic population of South-East Asia who inhabit a small island named 'Strait Island' in Andaman peninsula. Out of the total population of 53 individuals in Strait Island, only 10 people speak a highly endangered language mixed language by the same name. In this paper the author shares his experience of language documentation in Strait Island among Great Andamanese people for the ongoing project 'Vanishing Voices of Great Andamanese'. Agreeing with Romaine (2007), that the preservation of a language in its fullest sense ultimately entails the maintenance of the group who speaks it, the author believes that language documentation goes in hand in hand with the revitalization of language and culture. Language documentation not only builds bridges for language revitalization but also entails the process of cultural revitalization. In this paper the author argues that language documentation not only helps in maintenance, revitalization and motivation for transmission of an endangered language to next generations but also engenders a change in attitude towards language and associated culture by the speech community, which is very vital for turning the tide over. The author also discusses the necessity of extended efforts by the people involved in language documentation to bond with the local people and culture. In a community like Great Andamanese of Strait Island, sometimes the external genuine interest and appreciation of language and culture, creates a new zeal in the community to return to the vanishing traditions. On the other side of the canvas it was also observed that language documentation could just become mere archiving for 'others' by 'others'. In case of Great Andamanese it becomes essential that the collected information is made available to them in locally suitable format using relevantly suitable appropriate technology. The author believes that the primary forces for language endangerment in the case of Great Andamanese are both internal as well as external. An ideal language documentation program should try to raise awareness about these issues. In case of Great Andamanese, the amalgamated efforts of people involved in language documentation, environmental groups, local government and above all, the community itself can only sustain the vanishing voices.

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