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**Humane face of language documentation:  
a Great Andamanese experience**

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# **Humane face of language documentation: a Great Andamanese experience**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Human history is replete with stories of survival and birth of many old and new cultures across the globe. Human migration across the world combined with the emergence of agriculture, the rise of industrialization and colonialism, and later globalization has not only produced the homogenization of cultures across the world but has also resulted in complete or partial endangerment of many lesser known cultures. One of the notable fallouts of this upheaval is the loss of linguistic equilibrium in the world leading to language endangerment and language death (Romaine 2007: 116-117). Death of a language does not only mean that some linguistic resources have ceased to exist but it is the loss of centuries of human knowledge and understanding of the world around us.

In recent times greater public awareness about language endangerment and the urgency to preserve the vanishing voices, has given rise to new and upcoming field of Language Documentation. Himmelman (2006: 1) in simple words defines language documentation as a lasting, multipurpose record of a language. Unlike language description, language documentation not only serves the scientific community but also essentially serves the interests of the speech community. Following on this new approach towards documentation and revitalization of endangered languages, an ongoing project<sup>2</sup> (VOGA) aims to document the Great Andamanese language which is spoken by the Great Andamanese people living at Strait Island, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India. In this paper I present my team's experiences of undertaking language documentation resulting from the field work for six months at Andamans in 2005-2006.

## 2. PEOPLE AND LANGUAGE

### *2.1. People*

The Great Andamanese people belong to one of the few groups of indigenous people who are traditionally classified as Negrito<sup>3</sup> and are living in the islands of

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<sup>1</sup> We are sincerely grateful for the financial help from HRELP, SOAS, London for the ongoing project 'Vanishing Voices of the Great Andamanese' which facilitated field-trips. Thanks are due to AAJVS for giving us necessary permission to conduct our research. We are also grateful to the Great Andamanese community for their warmth and support.

<sup>2</sup> Vanishing Voices of the Great Andamanese (VOGA), a major documentation project of HRELP, SOAS, London and JNU, New Delhi.

<sup>3</sup> Radcliffe-Brown (1964: 2) defines 'negrito' race as black people with short stature and frizzy hair.

Andamans since time immemorial. Great Andamanese are basically hunters and gatherers who are believed to be the descendents of the very early migrants out of Africa which migrated in a single rapid dispersal which occurred somewhere between 60,000 to 70,000 years following a coastal route along the Arabian Peninsula to India, Malaysia, and Australasia (Thangraj et al, 2006). In fact the Great Andamanese is a term of convenience coined first by British colonizers and later adopted by scholars working in Andamans, to describe ten different groups of indigenous people who used to inhabit the whole Great Andaman group of Islands. Thus the Great Andamanese can be seen as a collection of ten extinct groups of indigenous people who shared linguistic and cultural affinities (Radcliffe-Brown, 1964: 497). This linguistic continuum and geographical distribution compelled the scholars to categorize the whole group in three divisions namely (Man, 1883):

1. Northern group consisting of *Aka<sup>4</sup>-Jero (Aka-Jeru)*, *Aka-Khora*, and *Aka-Care* groups of indigenous people.
2. Central group consisting of *Aka-puchikwar (Aka-Pujjukur)*, *Aka-Juwoi*, *Aka-Kede* and *Aka-Kol* groups of indigenous people.
3. Southern group consisting of *Aka-Bea* and *Aka-bale* groups of Indigenous people.

### 2.2. The language

The Great Andamanese language belongs to the Great Andamanese subgroup of the fifth language family of India i.e. Andamanese language family (Manoharan, 1989: 164). The language spoken by around ten speakers out of the total population of 53 individuals is a highly endangered mixed language with a clear dominance of extinct languages of North Andaman. The list of the surviving Great Andamanese speakers (as of communication in July, 2007) can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
Surviving Great Andamanese Speakers (as of communication in July, 2007)

Name	Lineage claimed by the speakers	Gender	Age <sup>5</sup> (years)
Boa Senior	Jeru	Female	87
Boro	Khora	Female	72
Nao Junior	Bo	Male	58
Peje	Jeru	Male	56
Nu	Jeru	Female	45
Lico	Jeru	Female	43

<sup>4</sup> The prefix Aka- is used before every group or language name which according to our analysis means ‘his or hers’.

<sup>5</sup> Approximate age calculated from government records and speakers own interpretations.

### 3. REASONS FOR LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT

Great Andamanese is a highly endangered language today due to several reasons ranging from external forces such as military, economic, cultural or educational subjugation to internal forces such as the community's negative attitude towards its own language. The history of the present critical situation of the Great Andamanese language is a tale of many tales which finally led to almost moribund status of the language.

#### 3.1. *External forces*

The Andaman Islanders had been following their traditional way of life i.e. of semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers-fishers well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, till British colonizers began to take control over the islands. The Great Andamanese population was estimated to be around 5000 in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century which declined to 625 by the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century due to prolonged contact with outsiders. The reasons for this decline were first because of punitive expeditions undertaken by British colonial forces and later by transmission of several diseases like tuberculosis, cholera, measles, syphilis etc from the settlers, when friendly relations were established by the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Once the friendly contacts were established the colonizers used the Great Andamanese to rein in the other hostile groups like Jarawa and Onge which resulted in a lot of hostility and bloodshed. Later the Japanese occupation of the islands and the subsequent aerial bombing brought several casualties among the Great Andamanese people who were despised as British spies. By the 1950's almost seven of the Great Andamanese groups (tribes) became extinct and whoever remained were mainly from the northern group (Aka- Jero, Aka-Khora and Aka-Care) except the lone survivor from the Aka-pujjukar who is still fondly remembered by the surviving Great Andamanese as 'Loka Raja'. Most of the languages could not survive this onslaught and went into oblivion. Later when the independent Indian government took over their British legacy in Andamans, the situation of surviving Andamanese speakers was no better. In 1949, the forest department of Andaman settled the remaining Andamanese at Bluff Island in Middle Andaman and some Great Andamanese men were employed in the forest department. But the settlement was found unsuitable by the Great Andamanese and later the Andaman administration after consulting the chief or Raja<sup>6</sup> of the community who was incidentally a *Pujjukar* man (Loka) selected Strait Island off the eastern coast in the Baratang group of Islands (originally a *Pujjukar* area) for the new settlement. Later in 1969, 10.79 sq. kms of forest land was cleared at Strait Island and the surviving Great Andamanese were eventually shifted there (Chakraborty, 1990: 7). These surviving Great Andamanese were mainly from North Andamans and were living near Webi village of Karens in Mayabandar tehsil.

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<sup>6</sup> It is noted by various scholars that the concept of chief or headman was not prevalent in the traditional Great Andamanese society and the designation of chief or Raja given to a person of the society, was a colonial export in order to facilitate efficient administration by the colonizers and later by the Indian government.

Cooper (2002: 180) writes that the drastic population reduction among the Great Andamanese has resulted in a change in genetic constitution, and expressed concern that the Great Andamanese may soon become extinct altogether. Present Great Andamanese at Strait Island lead a sedentary life with frequent visits to the city whose very foundation uprooted them completely from their home-islands. In the past, as recounted by elders, the vices of outside civilization like opium, tobacco and alcohol were introduced to them by their neighbors and co-workers in the Bush police<sup>7</sup> and the forest department. And these vices resulted in premature deaths in otherwise strong and healthy Great Andamanese. Though opium consumption has been stopped completely because of present Government control, alcohol is still a persistent addiction which has led to loss of self esteem and willingness to work among men especially. This also has to do with the policy of the administration which has made them completely dependent on monthly allowances in the form of food provisions and cash. On the other hand marriage alliances outside the community have also resulted in prolonged contact with outsiders which has resulted in continued exposure to ills of the outsider's society (Awaradi, 1990: 237). We know that since the formation of a penal colony in the Andamans, the Great Andamanese had been in constant contact with Indian prisoners and in fact some of them even started speaking 'Hindustani' in the British times as well. After Independence, the Indian government, having realized the island's strategic value, began resettling mainlanders in the Islands. And the population started expanding fast. The government gave land to ex-servicemen from defense forces and emigrants from East Pakistan which is now Bangladesh. To help in administration, it exported bureaucrats and clerks from the mainland. Around the same time, local contractors started bringing in cheaper migrant laborers. Most of them never went back because Andaman Islands offered better economic conditions. Then came the enterprising business men from Tamilnadu and Kerala of mainland India. By 1961, the population had reached 63,548. Three decades later, it had increased to more than four times to 280,661.

As of today, according to the Census of India 2001, the total population of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is around 314,239 out of which 203,968 constitute the population of the Andaman Islands. The greatest sufferers in the making of this 'Mini India' were the indigenous people of these islands.

### 3.2. *The lingua franca*

Hindi being the lingua franca of the settler population has also been adopted by the Great Andamanese people for communicating among themselves. Some of the children studying at government expense at a big city school in Port Blair recite Sanskrit chants and seldom try to speak in their native language. When our team went to meet them at the school, their teacher prided herself on their knowledge of majority community rituals and customs. There is no provision for these children to learn their native language at the school.

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<sup>7</sup> A colonial force formed by British colonizers to tame hostile indigenous groups of the islands in which Great Andamanese were employed.

There is a school at Strait Island where some of the Great Andamanese children study. The teacher at this school teaches children standard Hindi and English. And they never miss watching the Hindi movies showing at the teacher's residence. In fact we observed that the young people generally are so much exposed to Hindi music and movies that they hardly bother to learn any words of Great Andamanese. The proliferation of outside cultures and continued presence of representatives of the mainstream cultures in the form of around 15 settlement employees has made the use of Hindi and associated cultural imports necessary in their very own island.

### *3.3. Internal forces*

One of the major reasons for language endangerment of the Great Andamanese, as we observed, is community's negative attitude towards their own language. We observed that the young ones in the community generally felt that the Great Andamanese language was not worthy of learning and also difficult to speak. Most of the young people felt at ease speaking in Hindi which according to them helps them in identifying with the 'outsider's' identity. Moreover it was also observed by the authors that children were generally addressed in Hindi by the parents and instead of being called by their Great Andamanese names, they were usually called by their Hindi given names. This tendency of negative attitude towards their own language has resulted in the moribund status of the Great Andamanese language which is very difficult to overcome. The loss of ecology and people's continued dependence on the outside world has resulted in their alienation from native living practices. The dole system maintained by the local administration in the form of food grains, oil, vegetables etc given to them every month, has made life at Strait Island very sedentary. In the field, our team noted that the sedentary life style at Strait Island, not only has resulted in loss of self esteem and disinterest in life among young people but also has led to lack of interest in learning indigenous ways of life

## 4. FROM THE FIELD

The first ever language documentation project on the Great Andamanese language in its modern sense started with the commencement of VOGA in 2004 in which the authors are involved.

The most important observation we want to put forward concerning language documentation, is that the process of language documentation itself arouses enthusiasm for language use among the community and this can be easily utilized by the people involved in language revitalization.

During our field experience as expected in the beginning we experienced difficulties in convincing people of the importance of their own language. But gradually we realized that there are still some people in the community who still love their language and fondly remember the days gone by.

In our six month long stay at Strait Island, we observed that people knowing the language soon achieved a place of esteem over others who did not know the

language. The young people who were reluctant to utter anything in Great Andamanese were seen coming forward to discuss their language with us. Also there was a growing discussion about their state of being and the lost culture. One of the mothers made a resolution that she would arrange for the puberty-attainment ceremony for her daughter according to the Great Andamanese customs. The mothers who used to speak to their children in Hindi started addressing them in a smattering of Great Andamanese (though it might have been done to impress upon us or to hide something from us, still it brought us delight as we saw a ray of hope for the language). The children started getting scolded for not knowing the proper words in the language.

Apart from this, a growing enthusiasm was seen among young people in showing us their traditional hunting and fishing prowess. In fact, for the first time after many years the young men decided to use the old dug-out canoe lying in waste to catch turtles in the sea. One can blame all this on us, but what was heartening was to see them doing all this. At least, they were coming out of the very sedentary life of Strait Island. The knowledge of the Great Andamanese language became an asset which one could flaunt. The willingness with which the young ones took us to the forests of Strait Island and their painstaking remembering of the names of flora and fauna, made us realize another important facet of language documentation.

Thus language documentation not only helps in maintenance, revitalization and motivation for transmission of an endangered language to the next generations but also engenders a change in attitude towards the language by the speech community, which is very vital for bringing the language back to life.

## 5. ARCHIVING FOR PEOPLE

One of the primary goals of language documentation envisaged by Woodbury (2003: 35) is provision for the major stakeholders in the language documentation project i.e. the speech community itself. Digital archiving will look like archiving for 'others' by 'others' if the fruits of language documentation cannot be used by the speech community. Taking a cue from the Spoken Karaim CD experience (Csató and Nathan, 2003: 73), we propose the use of special multimedia based language learning programs using the 'Hole in the wall' set up.

The 'Hole in the wall' initiative was started in 1998 for mass computer literacy among children living in underprivileged areas using minimally invasive technology.<sup>8</sup> The results of the two experiments conducted at two specific underprivileged areas involved PCs designed for unsupervised use in playground-like situations by the children, showed that children can learn to use computers and the internet on their own without any active guidance (Mitra 2005: 71-72).

For the purpose of the Great Andamanese language, we propose that interactive multimedia pedagogical materials can be produced using the data from

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<sup>8</sup> By minimally invasive technology, we mean least intrusive and the simplest technology available. This term was first coined by Mitra (2000).

the language documentation and running those programs on PCs modeled on the 'Hole in the wall' experiments.

Apart from this, at a later stage a 'trilingual talking dictionary with pictures' can be presented to the children on the same platform.

However, we cannot forget the importance of printed books. Therefore this whole exercise would be supplemented by specially designed primers and workbooks for children. The VOGA team has already prepared a pictorial primer for Great Andamanese children.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Language documentation has emerged as field worthy of promotion in the face of rapidly dying languages across the world. In this paper we observed that language documentation of a highly endangered language like the Great Andamanese is not only essential for its linguistic values and for the good of our understanding of language, it also reverses the negative attitude towards the language practised in the community. In fact the very process of language documentation in the field is the first step towards stopping or at least delaying language death. Riding on the wave of this positive attitude towards the language, the people involved in language documentation can devise multi pronged strategies to maintain and preserve the language. In this digital age, the use of computers and multimedia can be a good weapon against the forces responsible for vanishing voices.

Language documentation not only builds bridges for language revitalization but also entails the process of cultural revitalization. Language documentation not only helps in maintenance, revitalization and motivation for transmission of an endangered language to the 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. There is a necessity for extended efforts by the people involved in language documentation to bond with the local people and culture. In a community like the 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. 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 the 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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