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Who are the Tangams and why is their case reflective of the larger issue of eroding languages across linguistically diverse Arunachal Pradesh? We explain. Last week Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu released a book titled Tangams: An Ethnolinguistic Study Of The Critically Endangered Group of Arunachal Pradesh. “Language loss is the reason for cultural erosion,” CM Khandu had said, emphasising how the book will help the future generations

of the Tangam community, which has reportedly 253 speakers concentrated in one small hamlet of Arunachal Pradesh. But who are the Tangams and why is their case reflective of the larger issue of eroding languages across linguistically diverse Arunachal Pradesh? We explain. Who are the Tangams? The Tangams are a little-known community within the larger Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh and reside in the hamlet of Kugging in Upper Siang district's Paindem circle. For long, the only account of the Tangams could be found in bureaucrat Tarun Kumar Bhattacharjee's book, *Tangams* (1975) where the community's population was pegged at 2,000 spread across 25 villages. From 2016 to 2020, a team from the Centre for Endangered Languages (CFEL) of Rajiv Gandhi University (RGU), carried out extensive field research and documented the community.

“Our survey revealed that Tangams were now concentrated in only one village (Kugging),

with 253 reported speakers,” said Lisa Lomdak, Assistant Coordinator, CFEL and Assistant Professor, Arunachal Institute of Tribal Studies (AITS), RGU. Why are there only 253 speakers? As per the UNESCO World Atlas of Endangered Languages (2009), Tangam – an oral language that belongs to the Tani group, under the greater Tibeto-Burman language family – is marked ‘critically endangered’. Kugging is surrounded by a number of villages inhabited by Adi subgroups such as Shimong, Minyongs, as well as the Buddhist tribal community of Khambas, among others. To communicate with their neighbours over the years, the Tangams have become multilingual, speaking not just Tangam, but other tongues such as Shimong, Khamba and Hindi.

“They rarely speak their own language now since their population is restricted to a single village. Their neighbours are various Adi subgroups, so they have picked up other Adi

languages and their own is slowly disappearing – even if a few still continue to speak Tangam,” said Kaling Dabi, Senior Research Fellow CFEL, who is doing a PhD on the Tangam community. Moreover, the Tangams are relatively unknown – even within Arunachal Pradesh. “The village lacks proper infrastructure in all basic sectors of education, health, drinking water facilities, road and electricity. Roads have reached Kugging only in 2018. Not a single person from the community has gone to university,” said Lomdak. What about other languages in Arunachal Pradesh? The languages of Arunachal Pradesh have been classified under the Sino-Tibetan language family, and more specifically under the Tibeto-Burman and Tai group of languages, such as Lolo-Burmish, Bodhic, Sal, Tani, Mishmi, Hruish and Tai.

While the education system has introduced Devanagari, Assamese and Roman scripts for most tribal languages, new scripts such as Tani

Lipi and Wancho Script have been developed by native scholars. According to Professor S Simon John, Director AITS & Coordinator, CFEL, RGU, there has been no systematic, scientific or official survey on the number of languages in Arunachal Pradesh till recently. An official linguistic survey by the state government began only in 2018, which is currently underway. Before that, People's Linguistic Survey of India was published in 2017. Still, experts peg the number of languages at 32-34, with a disclaimer that it is not a conclusive figure. "If we list the various linguistic varieties or dialects embedded within these languages, then the list can go upto to 90," said Lomdak.

Simon said that despite there being a plethora of languages in the state, almost all are endangered. According to the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (2009) more than 26 languages of Arunachal Pradesh have been identified as endangered.

The degrees range from 'unsafe', 'definitely endangered' to 'critically endangered'. Why are the languages at risk? The diversity of languages has led various communities to depend on English, Assamese and colloquial variety of Hindi called Arunachalee Hindi as the link languages. Many believe this shift has led to loss of native languages of the tribal communities. "Even the numerically larger tribes like Nyishi, Galo, Mishmi, Tangsa etc. whose population exceed the ten thousand mark are also not safe from endangerment, hence marked unsafe," states a 2017 CEFL research newsletter. "The classification implies that the younger generation of these tribes especially in the urban areas have mostly discarded the use of their mother tongue" it further states. Are languages like Tangam more vulnerable to extinction? Yes. The Tangam case is especially worrying because their population is so low.

"Another critically endangered language is

Meyor but they are better off than Tangam because they at least have a population of 1,000 odd people,” said Dabi, “So while almost all languages of Arunachal Pradesh are endangered, smaller languages are more vulnerable, and extinction is directly proportional to population.” Over the years, smaller groups – like Tangam – have become multilingual and learn several languages as a survival tool. “Our studies on Meyor show a major language shift from mother tongue to neighbouring languages like Miju Mishmi, Hindi etc,” said Lomdak, “While smaller groups have been successful in retaining their knowledge systems and language to an extent despite facing acute hardships related to health, economic and illiteracy, elders worry about the decreasing competency of younger members in speaking their languages and their tendency to dismiss their own languages.” Will the new book help? Yes, the 350-paged book, with photographs, becomes relevant for the future generation of

Tangam people.

“The significance of the present study is the multidisciplinary approach as it takes into account not only language, but also rituals, folklore, food habits, belief systems etc,” said Simon. According to Lomdak, the book attempts to cover “every aspect of Tangam life and culture” that will help the future children retain their unique identity as an ethnolinguistic group. “Though there are some excellent contemporary works on language of Tangams written by renowned linguists in collaboration with native speakers, this book will appeal to those interested in ethnolinguistics, anthropology and folkloristics of lesser studied tribes,” she said, adding the book has valuable data on endangered oral narratives like ritual songs, lamentation songs, lullabies and festival songs.