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Education

Internet Translation Tools Keep Alive A Multi-Language World Heritage

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When a language dies, so does a culture--its mores, meanings, values and outlooks, inextricably bound in daily discourse, the living embodiment of a community's history. Therefore, it is cause for concern when more and more Hindu youth around the world lose their connection with their mother tongues.

According to the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger 2009, there are 196 endangered languages in India, with a whopping 80 from the Northeast region alone. Often due to a desire for upward mobility (within India) or assimilation into the majority culture (outside India), the younger generations abandon their native tongues in favor of the dominant language. But the Internet is exploding with new tools to access most vernaculars on Earth, giving us hope for the preservation of native languages.

Sanskrit is not dead, but alive and thriving on the Internet. We have multiple Sanskrit dictionaries, lexicons, mobile apps and even daily Sanskrit news. See Sudharma (sudharma.epapertoday.com) and All India Radio's Sanskrit channel (www.newsonair.com/nsd_schedule.asp). Germany's University of Cologne has a great web app for the Monier Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary (www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/monier).

Tamil, Gujarati, Marathi, Telugu, Hindi, etc., are not endangered in India. But they are losing ground among youth outside India. As for Tamil, the web offers invaluable resources devoted to the conservation of Tamil for the Indian diaspora and wish to

learn and practice the language. The Digital South Asia Library of the University of Chicago (dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries) has the best Tamil dictionary. The Tamil Virtual Academy (www.tamilvu.org) has a great online learning course. The online Project Madurai, led by Dr. Kalyanasundaram, one of the world's top Tamil scholars, has digitized over 400 Tamil works from the fifth century bce to the present (www.projectmadurai.org).

And you can now find resources for hundreds of other languages. Want to learn Kashmiri? No problem: be sure to check out the work done by the Indian Institute of Language Studies (iils.org) for more information on preserving Indian languages. Get involved in India's culture by joining INTACH (www.intach.org). On an international scale, National Geographic's Enduring Voices project is a truly remarkable effort to document the planet's endangered languages (travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/enduring-voices).

With automated translation services becoming more and more sophisticated by the day, we also have tools to bring the entire corpus of knowledge from one tongue to another. Preserving or learning another language is now a feasible and even fun adventure for coming generations.

But let's not forget that it all starts at home. Professor Omkar Kaul of the Indian Institute of Language Studies, an organization at the forefront of preserving native Indian vernaculars, believes in the importance of family involvement in keeping languages alive. "The language maintenance in a family is primarily the responsibility of the parents. If they use their language in conversing among themselves and also with their children, the children will acquire it with ease."