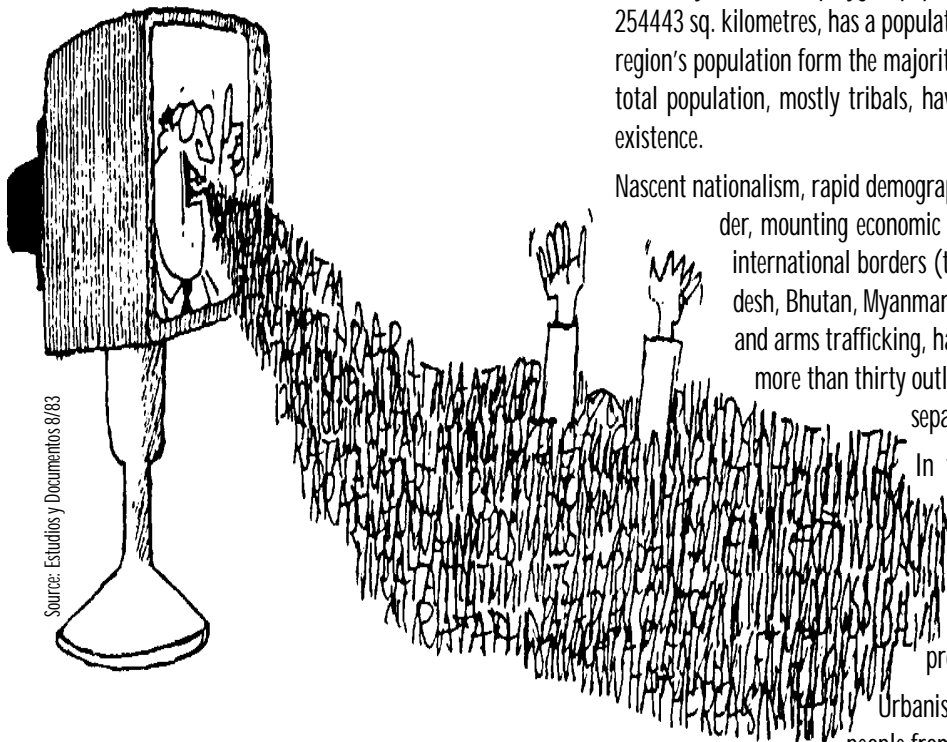


Languages of North East India:

PEOPLE'S POWERFUL PROPERTY

By George Plathottam SDB*

North East India: the situation



India's Northeastern region, situated at a tri-junction of South Asia, South East Asia and East Asia, has witnessed some of the most fascinating migrations in human history. The region is the home of more than a hundred ethnic groups who speak some four hundred and forty languages and dialects. Thus Northeast India is inhabited by some of the most colourful, extraordinarily varied and polyglot population of the world. The region which has a land area of 254443 sq. kilometres, has a population of 31.5 million. The tribals who constitute 28% of the region's population form the majority in four of the seven states in the region. 13.63% of the total population, mostly tribals, have accepted Christianity during the last 150 years of its existence.

Nascent nationalism, rapid demographic transition caused by migrations from across the border, mounting economic problems like unemployment, lack of development, vast international borders (the region has 99% international border with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, China and only 1% national border), the menace of drug and arms trafficking, have given rise to insurgency and militancy. The region has more than thirty outlawed insurgent organisations spearheading demands like separate state or nation.

In the face of such ethnic diversity and linguistic pluralism, there is also a growing ethnic consciousness which characterises the region. This is a comparatively new phenomenon. No doubt, ethnic diversity and plurality of languages contribute to cultural richness, but they also present a variety of problems.

Urbanisation and increasing cross cultural movements prevent people from striking deep roots in their culture or imbibing a deeper knowledge of their own languages and dialects. The mass media, notably television, video and cable TV, have tried to bulldoze smaller cultures and promote consumerism. Their invasion cause irrevocable damage to small languages and dialects. The ethnic communities which were hitherto dependent on barter economy, collective land ownership and joint farming are today exposed to the ill-effects of money economy, consumerism and individualism. The changes are too quick and too difficult to cope with.

Ethnic minorities all over the world are experiencing a serious threat to their identity. The threat is palpable on the tribal languages and dialects as well. The most serious victims of this

Global languages vis-a-vis local dialects

MEDIAFORUM 1/1998

onslaught are the smaller languages and dialects. As in a pond where the small fishes are in constant danger of being swallowed up by the big fishes, small languages are facing threats from bigger languages.

Inter-ethnic communication among the different ethnic communities of the Northeastern region in the past was negligible. The result was a great deal of isolation. The plurality of languages made inter-cultural communication well-nigh impossible. Today with efforts to globalise languages, the floodgates have been thrown open. But the tide is too strong and the small languages with all that they signify will be swept away.

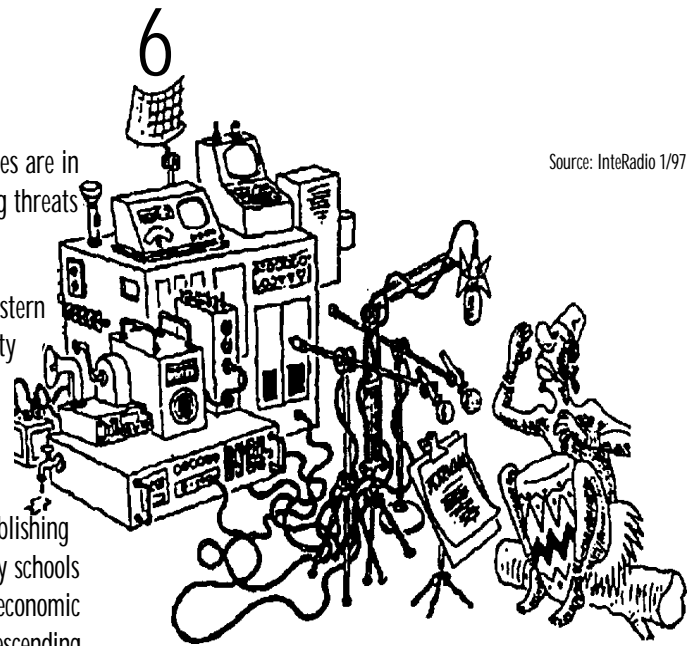
Today there is a growing awareness of the importance of languages as means of establishing contact with others. English education is much preferred and church-run missionary schools are sought after as it provides the key to socially upward mobility as well as to global economic market. English, Hindi or Assamese -international, national and regional languages in descending order of magnitude – serve as important links in inter-cultural communication. During the last few decades, most of the states in the region adopted English as official state language. Many young people today are conversant with it. One cannot dispute that the benefits of cross-cultural communication aided by English and other major languages are a boon, particularly for a people who have for so long lived in comparative isolation from each other. Language and literature have been one of the strongest means towards breaking out of tribal isolationism. It has helped open up new vistas of cross cultural communication and enabled people to cope with the new social, economic and political situation in which they find themselves.

But behind this advantage lurks the danger of neglecting one's own mother tongue. The younger generation who enjoys the benefits of modern education, who travel beyond the borders of their villages, are more seriously affected by this. Their education has been to a great extent detrimental to their insertion in the tribe or its language.

Historians of all hues have acknowledged the contribution of Christian missionaries to preserve tribal languages. William Carey's mission press in Serampore, Bengal, pioneered printing in several Northeastern languages. Successive generations of missionaries understood the importance of this mission and helped the growth and promotion of the languages of the region. The three groups of missionaries who made distinct contribution to the growth of the languages of Northeast India include the American Baptists, Welsh Calvinists known as Presbyterians, and the Catholics.

The missionaries undertook this task primarily to spread the Christian message and provide education. Their efforts to promote literacy and education went hand in hand with their evangelising efforts. They introduced the Roman script for most of the region's tribal languages. Linguistic and literary activities helped to forge unity among many Christian denominations, who otherwise were at loggerheads with each other. Lay leaders from the tribes who received the faith and benefitted by missionary education, became active collaborators in the work of writing and publishing. The Bible and other literature prepared for educational needs gave a particular tribe linguistic unity which, in turn, helped to create stronger ethnic cohesion and identity.

Tribal societies everywhere are facing the danger of being swamped by dominant cultures and



Source: InterRadio 1/97

Church's contribution to promotion of indigenous languages

The danger of extinction is real

Fidelity to the past, demands of the future –
where to draw the line?

global languages like English. Several indigenous languages in Latin America, Africa and Asia have been irrevocably lost. The mass media today cause serious threats to the future of the small languages, dialects and cultures. Mass media help perpetuate the myth „Big is Beautiful“.

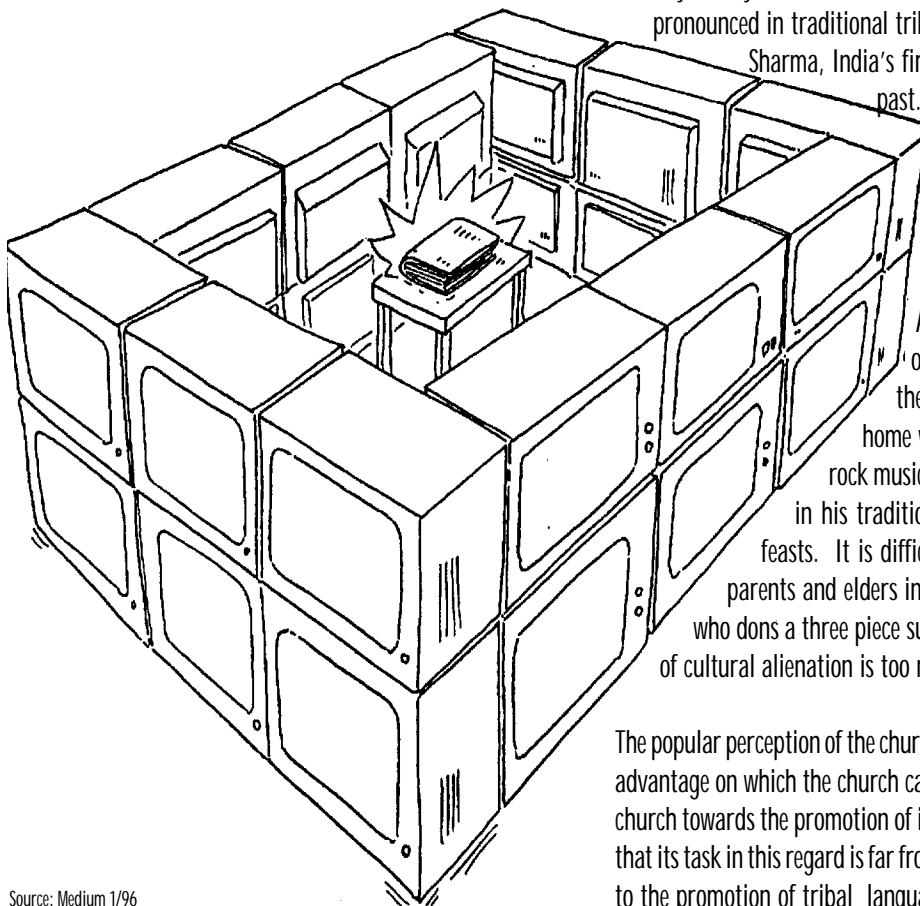
Several of the languages and dialects of Northeast India are spoken by less than five thousand people belonging to one or the other ethnic group, hence the danger of their being extinct is alarmingly high. Most of these languages are only oral. They have not been reduced to writing or any other permanent form which can ensure their continuity and survival. Modern education, rapid urbanisation are paving the way for cultural alienation. The rapid phase of cultural transition prevent absorption of values and world views inherent in the tribe. If the current trend continues several of the smaller languages and dialects of the region will face the danger of extinction.

Traditional languages, especially the smaller ones, have remained primarily oral. There is little effort to preserve them in writing. Printing and publishing are not considered viable as literacy rates are low. Even among the literates reading habits are poor. The extinction of a language should be a matter of serious concern as language is the most important vehicle for cultural expression and transmission of values and world views. The tribal societies do not have well developed art forms, but they have rich folklore. The oral tradition include a rich treasure-trove of folktales, stories and songs.

In every society there exists an incurable tension between the past and the present. This is more pronounced in traditional tribal societies. Such tension leads to uncertain future. Rakesh Sharma, India's first astronaut, said: " we must live in the future, not in the past." The past is fading away from our view while the future is exploding before us. The past we let go is a rich cultural past while the future is a lucrative technological future. The question is how to maintain the balance between fidelity to the past and demands of the future.

A survey among teenagers in the region shows they are often out of contact with their own culture. Mass media are sounding the death-knell of traditional media. A youngster feels more at home wearing jeans or other designer clothes, listening to jazz or rock music, watching the latest soap opera on the cable TV than attired in his traditional garb, singing folk tunes or participating in traditional feasts. It is difficult for them to communicate meaningfully with their own parents and elders in rural settings. Even an 'ideal' adult is portrayed as one who dons a three piece suit and smokes a Marlboro cigarette! The irrevocable process of cultural alienation is too mind-boggling and to some extent irreversible.

The popular perception of the church as an agent of change in Northeast India offers a distinctive advantage on which the church can build. While we affirm the remarkable contribution of the church towards the promotion of indigenous languages of Northeast India, we must also admit that its task in this regard is far from over. The church must continue to reaffirm its commitment to the promotion of tribal languages, cultures and world views. It must evolve new methods



and explore fresh avenues to preserve and promote local languages, literature, and ensure that languages and cultures do not suffer extinction. The church must take seriously the demands of the future and the need for preserving the precious legacy of the past in indigenous cultures and languages. The motives for its efforts should go beyond mere evangelistic considerations, but take seriously the task of the Good News to permeate and evangelise cultures themselves. (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n.20).

The tasks before the church

This is not easy when the traditional societies perceive the church as an agent of socio-economic development and herald of modern education, which in many instance means English education. The church cannot run away from its mission of liberating people from whatever is oppressive and demeaning. But the church must also affirm to the people that it has no exclusive language policy which tries to level all differences for the sake of greater uniformity. The culture and language of the church are those of the people themselves.

Languages have miles to go

Language is a very powerful tool for communication. It is not for conquest or domination. Our dreams, aspirations, songs and sobs can be discerned only when we are attuned to that medium. Literature is the outcome of the authentic articulation of these ebb and flow within our individual and collective consciousness. Even as we search for languages which can help forge unity, open up vistas of communication with more peoples and communities across tribes, nations or continents, we cannot afford to barter away our own languages. Every language is a precious legacy for those who possess it, because that is the most appropriate medium of articulating our inner selves. Languages have miles to go. In that sense, the task of the church includes fostering appreciation for one's own language and culture and ensuring that languages live and grow.

** The author is the Director of Don Bosco Communications and Publications, based in Guwahati/Assam, Northeast India. The initiative, besides other engagements, attempts to promote some of the several languages of the region through publishing activities.*

Moreover, Fr. George Plathottam teaches media-related subjects, conducts journalism workshops and writes for the two Asian Catholic Newsagencies UCANews and SAR News, and as freelancer for other periodicals. In 1992 he was awarded the Nord-Süd Freundschafts-Preis (North-South Friendship Award) presented by the International Network of Young Journalists for a paper on the theme „Overcoming world problems in the spirit of true partnership between North and South“. The prize, a two-week visit to Germany, was sponsored by the Press and Information Department of the German government, Heinrich Jansen Cron Foundation and the German Catholic Press Association. The author holds a Master's Degree in Theology and Sociology.

