

CEL-SU working on endangered, lesser known languages of Sikkim, North Bengal

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GANGTOK, July 20: The Centre for Endangered Languages, Sikkim University (CEL-SU) here is a one-of-its-kind centre that is dedicated towards carrying fieldwork, research, analysis, and documentation of endangered and lesser known languages of Sikkim and the North Bengal region.

Established in 2016 for documentation, promotion and preservation of endangered languages across India, the CEL is funded by the University Grants Commission (UGC). It came into existence due to the growing concern for the endangered languages of the world.

"It became a UN's call, then Central government's call and later UGC's call, and Sikkim University being a central university, was asked to submit a proposal to study endangered languages of the region," said CEL coordinator and SU department of Nepali professor Samar Sinha.

In response to the UGC's proposal to address the issue, the then vice-chancellor T.B. Subba had proposed to set up the CEL-SU for preservation and promotion of endangered languages (as it was known earlier) at Sikkim University on July 1, 2013. Consequently, SU completed the constitution of advisory board, coordination committee, and purchase committee along with the appointment of the coordinator and the auditor, opening of bank account and allotment of physical space for CEL, SU and basic office amenities. On fulfilling the UGC's terms and conditions, the approved fund was transferred to the CEL-SU on November 2015 and became operational in December

2016. The centre is functioning and is recognised as an independent centre under the university, it was informed.

The CEL began with the documentation of five languages of Sikkim and the North Bengal. Bhujel, Mangar and Gurung were taken up as the initial three languages approved by the first advisory board meeting. On the suggestion of the second advisory board meeting, the CEL-SU in consultation with the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) began documentation of Sherpa and Rai-Rokdang languages.

Mangar/Magar is one of the indigenous languages. Some languages belong to the Kirati sub-family of the Tibeto-Burman Language and some belong to the Bodic branch. Among them, Rai-Rokdang is the most interesting one. Nobody has worked on Rokdangs and their linguistic status, shared Sinha.

Rokdang is one of the pacha (septs) of the Bantawa clan under the Rai community. The Rokdangs claim to have a distinct language of their own different from Bantawa. They are mostly concentrated in Rolep, East Sikkim, and a few families are also said to reside in places like Namchi, Gangtok, Samsing and Gelling in Sikkim. There is almost no previous linguistic work or documentation to be found for the Rokdang language. The findings of the pilot survey conducted by the CEL, SU shows that Rokdang is highly endangered and is on the verge of extinction. It is also found that there is major language shift among the Rokdang community members, who are multilingual. Although the community is spread across the borders in Nepal and India, the language speakers

are mostly concentrated in Rolep in East Sikkim. Interestingly, the language is spoken by elderly generation which also counts not more than 20 speakers out of the 200 community members in Rolep.

In 2017, the CEL team visited Rolep, to meet the family and fellow Rokdangs of our former student (who introduced us to the language). After initial contact, the centre started to work on the almost-extinct language, recalled the CEL coordinator.

On the basis of the data collected, CEL has a dictionary, sketch grammar, social linguistic profile and socio-cultural narratives of the Rokdangs. The dictionary is also available in the Android app format.

The template has been followed for all five languages.

Bhujel is an extinct language in Sikkim and Darjeeling and the community is trying to revive it, it was informed.

The CEL, SU has also been working with the communities of the five languages, hand-in-hand. "We have resource persons from all the five languages, who train them and other members of the communities. We also celebrate different academic and cultural programmes like International Mother Language Day with the communities and linguists. Overall, the centre is a bridge between the community and academia," highlighted Sinha.

At the same time, the centre also work on scripts, oral traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, different cultural texts etc. The CEL, SU has compiled a comprehensive corpus of transcribed, annotated and translated data of the five endangered languages of the said region.

On the occasion of the 13th foundation day of Sikkim University earlier on July 2, Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalayas Endangered Language Archive (SiDHELA) created by CEL, SU was launched by the vice-chancellor Prof Avinash Khare.

SiDHELA is India's first endangered languages archive, and forms a platform for a linguistic resource of the languages spoken in Sikkim and the North Bengal. The main aim of the archive is to preserve the primary data collected for long term usage and dissemination. It is developed as a regional archive, follows the Dublin Core Metadata standards and adheres to the Open Language Archives Community's recommendations. The effort for the development of the SiDHELA was being carried forward under the guidelines of the Digital Archive for Indian Languages, an initiative by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi and Computational Resource on South Asian Languages, University of North Texas. The SiDHELA currently, has lexicon, sentences, folk songs and tales, procedural instructions and narrations from the endangered languages of the region. It is hosted on the D-Space and maintained by the CEL, SU in collaboration with the Central Library, Sikkim University. The CEL, SU has also conducted multiple workshops and training programmes, in collaboration with other Centres.

The centre currently has 11 members. It aims at taking up new languages and increasing the human resources to 18. We want to give back to the community, said Samar Sinha to SIKKIM EXPRESS.