

14 ethnic languages on verge of extinction: IMLI

Shormila Sikder

BANGLADESH'S 14 ethnic languages are on the verge of extinction, the International Mother Language Institute found during its two-year survey.

The survey reveals that 14 ethnic groups with a population of around 70,000 virtually abandoned their languages.

The first ever 'Ethno-linguistic survey of Bangladesh' spanning June 2014 and July 2016, aimed at revitalization and preservation of the nation's ethnic languages through documentation.

Even ethnic groups with

significant population seldom speak in their own languages, found the survey.

Out of 1,000 Shouras, only four speak their language and even they don't teach their children how to speak it, shows the survey.

The Tipras in the hill tracts and Chittagong have forgotten their own language as they prefer to speak only Bangla.

Ethnic people who still speak their tongues are reluctant to teach their children how to speak their own languages out of fears that it might affect their prospects of finding good jobs on leaving schools.

The survey reveals that

the 14 ethnic languages facing extinction include, Mundari, Malto, Kheyng, Khumi, Kol, Chak, Pangkhwa, Patra also called Leng, Lusai, Khariya, Shoura, Koda, Kando and Rengmitca.

The number of the Mundaris now stands at 38,212 and the Malto at less than 8,000.

The other groups have smaller populations, the smallest being Rengmitca with less than 40 survivors, found the survey.

The endangered languages have no alphabets or written scripts of their own.

The languages of the 40 ethnic groups living in the

three hill tract districts, Sylhet, Mymensingh, Rajshahi and Rangpur divisions don't get the opportunities to pursue education in their own languages.

The country's first ever large-scale linguistic survey, said that scientific methods were used in the IMLI survey to differentiate between a language and its dialects.

IMLI deputy director and spokesman Md Abdul Wahad told New Age that 200 field supervisors collected data from the ethnic groups under the guidance of two researchers and three consultants.

He said that the three-volume survey report would be unveiled soon.

IMLI survey's advisor

Shourav Sikder told New Age that the previous survey found more ethnic languages as some of the researchers mistook dialects with languages.

Shourav who teaches linguistics at Dhaka University said that scientific methods were used in the IMLI survey to differentiate between a language and its dialects.

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Shourav said that two years were too short time for a serious survey like this which delved into the histories of so many ethnic languages.

The funding too was totally inadequate, he said.

UNESCO defines a language as endangered when parents no longer teach their kids how to speak it.

Ethnic rights activist and Bangladesh Indigenous Forum general secretary Sanjeeb Drong differed with the IMLI findings and said all the ethnic languages in the country were facing extinction.

He said even Chakma, the

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14 ethnic languages

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language of the country's largest ethnic community was in decline as it was not the medium of education for the Chakmas.

Saujeeb also said that many indigenous people left the country finding their life, property and dignity at stake.

Unless the situation

changes, he said, more ethnic people would leave the country causing further decline to even vibrant ethnic languages.

IMLI officials, however, expressed the hope that the survey findings might help bring recognition to the eth-

nic languages.

Anthropologist Prashanta Tripura described language as inalienable to the existence of ethnic groups as they were getting marginalized.

He demanded drastic reforms in the country's language policy to facilitate a change in the situation.