

Speaking River, Speaking Rain by M Yuvan

"Are languages then just a collection of words, syntax, and semantics? I'd like to sometimes see them as seeds and sometimes as fields -- alive as the minds, tongues, throats, bodies and air they pass through; germinating, growing roots, bearing fruit, evolving like beings. But also holding space, expanding out like a unique land of perception. A non-physical geography hosting human and non-human drama. A living medium, a speech-scape." In this evocative piece, writer and teacher M. Yuvan layers anecdotes that shine a small, bright light on India's linguistic diversity and weaves in similar stories from around the world. What does it mean for the future of the human species to keep the richness of our multiple languages alive? How does language tether the Soul to the wisdom of the Earth?

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"In our faith there is no heaven or hell", spoke Mayalmit Lepcha in the Janata Parliament – an Indian people's parliament which happened online this year, on account of Covid. Her network is spotty. She's in the mountains. I listen hard and try to piece together what she's saying. Mayalmit is from the Lepcha tribe in North Sikkim, and she is among the people on the ground fighting the Teesta dam project in her state. In the virtual parliament she explains how the successive damming of her community's waterways has displaced her people and decimated her forests.

I wrote to Mayalmit later, telling her that I was awestruck by the story she narrated about her culture, but couldn't quite catch it fully. She completes it over email to me – "all the rivers, mountains and lakes are very sacred for Lepchas. We worship and believe that the river Rongyoung (a tributary of Teesta river) is most sacred among the rivers of Sikkim. Lepcha believe that after they die their soul travels back to Poomzoo Lyang through Rongyoung river, to the foothills of Khangchendzonga".

I spent the next week finding and reading up all I could about Lepcha culture. I was deeply captivated by how the tribe's spirituality braided with their land's ecology and geography. I began seeing Mayalmit and her community's protests in a different light now. They were not campaigning for the rivers and forests just as such. It was a fight for their identity, sacrality, themselves.

In Lepcha folklore, the stormy tumultuous love between the rivers Rongyoung and Rangeet culminates in their uniting as Teesta (Teeth-Sutha), Sikkim's life-giving river. Their genesis story is not an abstracted one, happening somewhere in an unearthly heaven. In their genesis, among many passed down versions of it, Itbumu 'The great mother' created the first Lepcha man and woman with pure snow from Mt. Khangchendzonga. After death, they believe that their souls traverse their rivers upstream and go to rest in the mountain again. Being an outsider to their tribe, I can't

help note how their cultural life-cycle seems so alike to the hydrological cycle here - invoking the transformations between mountain, river, snow and life. Lepcha culture is rich with mountainous and riverine references. Tsun is to meet or join, to be confluent as rivers (a-tsun is river confluence). Un-ti is to swell or increase like river. Kyok is to be curved like river.

Here is a Lepcha blessing -

Ado bryan run-nyo run-nyit su-re zon ma-ta-o.

(May your name be celebrated as the rivers Rongyoung and Rangeet).

Mt.Khangchendzonga as seen from Pelling, Sikkim.

In 2012, a paper in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences made a profound finding. Written by L.J. Gorenflo and colleagues, it was called the 'Co-occurrence of linguistic and biological diversity in biodiversity hotspots and high wilderness areas'. It surmised one simple fact - that wherever in the world biodiversity was high, linguistic, and cultural diversity was also high, and vice versa. The world's biodiversity hotspots were also the most linguistically diverse places. The richness of language and the richness of life everywhere on Earth, were deeply synonymous in their own complex ways. Some subsequent literature suggested that the same climatic and environmental factors influence both. In other places, life and language share wondrous reciprocities and direct mutual relationships.

Debra Utacia Krol, a journalist from the Xolon Salinan tribe in Central America, has written about how the Honu or the Green Sea Turtle in Hawaiian, made an extraordinary comeback in the 1980s after its massive decline on the Hawaiian coasts. This was after the local Hawaiian language was revived back into schools, following a law banning it being repealed. The turtle's totemic role and location in people's cultural imagination was held together in the semantic bonds of their mother tongue. When it came back into schools and the lives of people, it fuelled extraordinary conservation efforts. Around the world there are several such stories of the co-extinction of life and language, though at the same time stories of co-resurrection as well. And surely there are many more to be discovered.

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In Mithu and Midu, the dialects of the Idu Mishmi tribe of Dibang Valley, Arunachal Pradesh, almost every aspect of their landscape is animate and exercises agency. Khinu is the word for spirits in Idu speech. The Khinu of the river is Beka, the Khinu of the hills is Golo, Khe-pa - of deep gorges, Asha - of large trees, Apu-mishu - of land, Epa-saya of forest and so on. Spirits slip our objectification, elude materiality, escape intellect. But the Mishmi include this otherness of their landscape, their world, in their everyday speech. Practices, ceremonies, and rituals unique here, exist to appease, acknowledge, and constantly recognize this beyond-human participation.

The pre-eminent British nature-writer Robert Macfarlane calls language a 'geological force'. And in corollary to this, land and its influence can be said to birth language in its image. It continually parturates a vision, a field of perception, cognition - which perhaps can hold the way a place wants itself to be seen and belonged to. In her essay, the Landscape Glossary, photographer Arati Kumar Rao quotes a shepherd in the Thar desert describing his mother tongue to her - "Yeh drishya ka roop hai, bhasha nahi" (This is the land's manifestation, not a language).

Language in the way we've come to define and experience it, is considered a uniquely human capacity. Perhaps it's a bit more than that too. Maybe it's a unique ecological bonding shared between human-kind and the planet. Not an isolated capacity of a species, but a relationship. We find ways of speaking through the environment but places, environments too find ways of speaking through us.

In March of 2019, at the Songlines Farm-School (which I am part of running) the grade 9 children went out into the Vellaputhur village, Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu, where our campus is located. Over two days children in small groups walked, interacted, and interviewed the people of the village - farmers, teachers, panchayat members, elders, livestock-keepers, householders and so on. We learnt a great deal about the village and its community and forged new bonds with our surroundings. One old woman told us the story of the village's name. Vellai in Tamil is 'white' and 'Putthu' is 'termite mound'. "Many decades ago, we couldn't even dry our clothes on bare ground here. Termites would finish them off" she told us. "We kept boiled rice in the four corners of our hut to feed them". Each temple in the village, most of them in worship of the goddess Amman, had a termite hill inside it. Or rather, temples were built incorporating termitaries.

The tank near the centre of the village was called a Poigai. It was the word for a waterbody with lotuses, lilies, and general aesthetic beauty. Women lined up on its steps in the mornings with bright plastic drums to draw water. Cattle were herded here for drinking in the afternoons. Sengai on the other hand was a waterbody which received lot of sediment run-off and had its surface covered with duckweed. Here are some more words for waterbodies in common use from this part of Tamil Nadu, a region where farmer communities have a long tradition of water conservation and management systems -

Pongukinaru - Well fed by a bubbling spring.

Theppakkulam - Temple tank with a paved path along the parapet.

Sunai - a natural pool in the mountain.

Kundu - large natural pool used for bathing.

Eri - a manmade lake as a catchment for rainwater and irrigation, defined by a bund on three sides and one side open for catchment.

Aazhikkinaru - A freshwater spring or well occurring near the seashore

Ooruni - tank for drinking water

Kumizhi - a rock-cut well, fed by a spring

Traveling a few hundred miles Northeast from Tamil Nadu, one reaches Karnataka. We are

no longer in the plains. The terrain is pleated deeply by the Western Ghats and its wet rainforests. In the Kismwar glossary, Ullal Narasinga Rao documents a Kannada lexis from various subjects and dialects. Here are some words for rain in Kannada, a language in which many cosmic events are synonymous to periods of rain for people to augur its nature from the night sky -

Bedar - a short and impetuous rain.

ಡಂ"ಡಂಫ-ಡಂ-ಡಂ! - Rain.

ಡಂ^ಡಂ-ಡಂ!ಡಂ-ಡಂಫಡಂ-ಡಂ-ಡಂ¶ - Hail.

ಡಂ^ಡಂ¥ಡಂ¥ಡಂಫ - Heavy rain.

ಡಂ'ಡಂಫಡಂ-ಡಂ- - Hail storm.

ಡಂ'ಡಂಫಡಂ¥ಡಂ^a - a continued shower.

ಡಂ>ಡಂ¶ಡಂ-ಡಂµಡಂ¶ಡಂ³ಡಂ¶ - drizzle.

ಡಂšಡಂ°ಡಂ-ಡಂ! - gentle, light rain.

ಡಂ[]ಡಂ°ಡಂ-ಡಂಫಡಂ¶ - an unexpected shower.

ಡಂ[]ಡಂಫಡಂ¥ಡಂಫ - sufficient rains to render the Earth fit for sowing.

ಡಂ[]ಡಂ^aಡಂ®ಡಂಫಡಂ-ಡಂಫ - Sleet.

Some cosmic terms -

ಡಂ"ಡಂ³ಡಂ^aಡಂ"ಡಂಫಡಂ'ಡಂ^aಡಂ³ಡಂಫ - rain from 5th to 18th June, marking the advent of the Southwest monsoon (also the star Pollux and its Zenith period).

ಡಂ^ಡಂ³ಡಂ¥ಡಂ³ಡಂಫ - rain from 19th June to 2nd July, marking the outburst of the Southwest monsoon (also the star Betelgeuse and its zenith period).

ಡಂ—ಡಂ¶ಡಂ'ಡಂ©ಡಂ°ಡಂಫ - rain from 17th to 30th of July, when gram and mango is sown (also the star delta Centauri and its zenith period).

The Vellaputhur Eri (a man-made lake with bunds on three sides and one side open for catchment), the lifeline of the Vellaputhur village.

In a geographically distant continent, but in an interesting likeness to the Lepcha, Mishmi and the farmers of Tamil Nadu, several Australian aboriginal languages are profoundly 'geo-centric'. In the Guugu Yimithirr language spoken by the indigenous people of North Queensland, there are no words for 'left' and 'right' which are 'self-centric' so to speak. It purely uses cardinal directions (Gungga, Jiba, Naga and Guwa- approximately North, South, East and West but slightly shifted in orientation of their seasonal winds). Their Origo (frame of reference) is the Earth in all their communication. Cardinal directions are one of the first things Aboriginal children learn. And very early, their powers of navigation, spatial memory and awareness are known to be exceptional, as is their feeling of belonging to the land, empathy and kinship for other life.

In my sessions with younger children at my school, I try to replicate this aboriginal philosophy. We do a handful of activities which require orienting to cardinal directions. One such game which children do surprisingly well at is to be blindfolded and guided around the classroom or part of the campus by a friend using cardinal directions alone. Before this, they spend time calibrating themselves - to the sounds, smells and patterns of light coming from different directions which may guide them in the absence of vision.

These ways of speaking within these communities carry not just words but values, metaphors, knowledge, and ways of seeing. They carry stories, and in the words of the

Nigerian poet Ben Okri “stories are the secret reservoir of values; change the stories that individuals or nations live by, and you can change the individuals and nations themselves”. One relevant exemplar for Okri’s statement are the Anansi folktales originating from the Asante people in Africa. Anansi is a trickster-spider and folk-hero. A serial rule-breaker, an arachnid unconfined by social norms and a master of language and wordplay – which he uses to get the better of his adversaries. Through the Atlantic slave trade, starting in the 16th century, when Europeans shipped millions of Africans to Jamaica to make them labour in plantations, Anansi tales travelled with the people. They morphed in their tellings to include the realities of bondage and captivity. Anansi and his adventures inspired acts of resistance by the African people to weaken the structures of domination in these plantocracies. The spider became a symbol of dissent, metaphor for insubordination and a way to remember homeland.

The meshwork of these various subliminal parts of speech is in some ways inseparable from its place, and no longer the same when separated. To borrow David Abram’s words – “the local Earth is for them, the very matrix of discursive meaning; to force them from their native ecology is to render them speechless – or to render their speech meaningless”. Language is at the confluence of a region’s collective mindscape and landscape. And so it always carries in it, affirms, and conveys an ecological identity of some form of the people who speak it, as strongly as and braided with a social and cultural one. I remember the words of Lado Sikaka, a leader of the Dongria Kondh tribe in Odisha. In a speech campaigning against the mining giant Vedanta in the Niyamgiri hills, Lado says “to kill the mountain is to kill us”. More notably, his words, even when translated from Kui, never rove a distinction between the mountains and his people. All of them were one life – an ontology quite despicable and dead to a corporate mining company to whom the hills were ‘bauxite’, ‘raw material’, ‘growth potential’ and other posh terms for plunder. In a recent panel discussion, I happened to listen to the amazing young Adivasi activist Archana Soreng. She spoke about the Khadia tribe to which she belonged to, and how different surnames of different clans meant rock, river, plants, birds, and other denizens of her land, forming the identities of her people.

Arne Naess wrote about the Lapps community of Norway when they spoke in court under the charge of ‘illegal’ demonstrations, at a dam being built on their river. To the court’s perplexity, the people asserted that the river in question ‘was’ themselves. A spiritual oneness with the river was their lived reality.

Language, consciousness, and place share a mysterious relationship in the human mind, rooting, growing, merging into one another in strange and little understood ways. Words can change the breadth of our sensorium and experience, sometimes just as strongly as sensory perception nourishes what we speak and describe. The hundreds upon hundreds of Kigo words (season words) in traditional Japanese poetry forms is something which comes to mind here. They evoke each season and its manifestations, natural and human responses to it and the inner experiences associated with them in such granularity, filling the passing days of the year with wonder and a keenness of being. The great Indian linguist G.N. Devy says that “each language is a complete and unique worldview”. He laments in so much of his writing about how India, a naturally linguistically diverse and plural subcontinent, is becoming a language graveyard in the way states are being divided and how political systems work. Homogenization, mono-culturing in its numerous forms in human society is one of the greatest violence of our times. Are many worldviews important? Are many ways of seeing and knowing, are many realms of perception needed? When do they not become necessary? And for whom? In another talk Devy tells the fascinating story of how the tribes of the Andaman Islands sensed the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004 well before the event and went to higher ground, though urban society

has labelled them as 'primitive' tribes. "They have words which allow them to sense the different textures of waves" he narrates. "They said the 'ocean is angry with us' and travelled up the hills in repentance."

During the great indigenous uprising in Mexico, the Zapatista movement, one of the declarations made by the people was "the world we want is a world in which many worlds fit". The living Earth is naturally, intrinsically such a place. A magical place. An infinitely vivid and fluid mosaic of ecologies, realities. A world of many worlds.

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