One tribe, 3,000 words

The mostly oral language of Gondi is all set to get its first dictionary, both written and as an app.

Pop quiz: Which Indian language is spoken by two million people across multiple States, has six different dialects, a rich folk tradition, but can be written by only 100 people? Before Google it, the answer is Gondi, the language of the Gond people, spoken in the six States of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Telangana, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh.

Gondi has more speakers than many official languages listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. Despite so many people speaking the language, Gondi is in the ‘vulnerable’ category on Unesco’s Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger. This has now prompted a group of people to put together the country’s first Gondi dictionary.

The project is spearheaded by Shubhranshu Choudhury, founder of CGNet Swara, a voice-based portal that allows people in the Central Gondwana region to report local news by making a phone call. It’s long overdue, says Choudhury. “There is a gaping communication gap between the Gondi people and the rest of the world.” Consolidating the language, spoken predominantly by tribal populations in Maoist-affected States, will not only benefit the communities but also help in smooth everyday interactions with the state.

Who speaks?

“We began Adivasi Swara in Gondi five years ago as a news initiative by tribals, for tribals,” says Choudhury. The reason behind this was a shortage of journalists who could speak in Gondi. This wasn’t surprising, considering that “about 99% of Maoists today are Gondi speakers, and 99% among them are school dropouts who speak no other language. A lot of their grievances are due to this lack of communication.”

Choudhury saw the gap in reportage from the tribal perspective, dived into it, and hit multiple roadblocks. There was a lot, he realised, that he didn’t know. “We realised that Gondi isn’t a language per se,” he says. It is spoken differently in each State.

“Each language has its own dialects. Hindi, for instance, has many, but the version that we all read and write is Khari Boli. With every language, the state comes in to create a standard,” says Choudhury. This is true not only for languages listed in the Eighth Schedule but also for those like Chhattisgarhi, which has been declared ‘rajbhasha’ or official language of Chhattisgarh along with Hindi.

The state’s role

“We need a standard language for education, administration and even journalism,” Choudhury points out. This is even more urgent in the conflicted regions the Gondi tribes inhabit, over and
beyond the cultural need of preserving songs, folk tales and more that the tribe has been handing down orally till date. For instance, Choudhury says, “The Forest Rights Act, as far as I know, has not been translated into Gondi, though this is one community for which the Act is very relevant.” Of the six States, some have been more proactive in promoting Gondi. In the Telugu-speaking regions, there has been a lot of work in the Gondi language. But a major issue is that Gondi has been developed separately in each place with no Central coordination. In each place, the dialect has been influenced by the dominant State language.

“It took us eight meetings and four years to come up with the first standard dictionary,” says Choudhury. CGNet Swara worked with members of the Delhi-based Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, and with 60 representatives of six Gondi dialects to compile a thesaurus. Once they had put together the words that each dialect uses to refer to a particular object or concept, the standard term among all the variants was selected by vote. “Last week, we chose all the standard words,” says Choudhury. For now, the dictionary has been printed in Devanagari. The feat was gargantuan but it’s just the beginning. “Now, it stands at 3,000 words, and is too small to be called a dictionary, but the community can only take it so far. Hopefully, the government will take this ahead,” says Choudhury. Microsoft has now stepped in and volunteered to develop an oral version of the dictionary as a mobile app. This makes sense, since most of those who know the language know it orally.