



A new language in the Intensive Care Unit

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Received: 16-SEP-2018

Accepted: 08-NOV-2018

Published Online: 28-NOV-2018

Abstract

India is a multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual nation. A chance encounter with a new language in the ICU led to a realisation of the language and the unique culture of a people who are on the margins of Indian society, but may have well been India's first internationalists.

Keywords: Culture; Diversity; Language; Narrative medicine; Medical humanities

Doctors in India are translators as well as interpreters of maladies, attempting to translate - and imperfectly at that - the content, flavours and rhythms of the words spoken by a myriad of tongues of this land into a flavourless English of the medical variety.

"How is the old lady in the ICU?" I asked my resident-on-duty during our evening conversation on the phone.

"Seems better, Sir. She is talking a lot now, but nobody seems to recognise her language."

I asked whether the language was Beary. I was trying to flaunt my knowledge of the local languages of Mangalore, a city that I have been living in for the past three years. It is the fifth language spoken here (excluding Hindi and English). The other four are Tulu (the most widely spoken), then Kannada, Malayalam, and Konkani.

"No sir, it isn't. It sounds like a mixture of Hindi, Marathi and Kannada."

Languages grow very well in the red earth of this region, and I was curious

Cite this article as: Bhargava A. A new language in the Intensive Care Unit. RHIME. 2018;5:69-71.

and excited to know what this new linguistic gem was.

The next day, therefore, I approached our lady in the ICU with more than the usual interest. The family waiting outside explained that this was her first ever admission to a hospital. She looked quite fit at 85-years of age, had the regal bearing of a matriarch, a ruddy complexion which spoke of years of hard work in the sun, and despite her illness (an acute coronary syndrome), had a cheery demeanour. Her hands were richly tattooed, tell-tale marks of a different culture, and everything about her spoke of a different genealogy.

I spoke to her in my broken Kannada, but her responses were in a tongue which, though it included Kannada, went bewilderingly beyond it. There were even strains of Marwari in her dialogue. I gave up trying to figure out this addition to the tower of Babel in Mangalore, and asked her what the name of her language was.

"Lambani," she responded.

The smart people with their smart-phones swung into action and in a millisecond, the mystery was solved. The lady was identified as being from the Lambadi tribe, which corresponds to the Banjaras of yore. The origins of the Banjaras are traced to the region of Western Rajasthan extending up to Afghanistan. Once a nomadic community, they were possibly the original salt traders of India, but now are settling down into sedentary occupations like farming. They are, however, still marginalised.

The patient's language was a real potpourri, and fun to listen to. The Lambani language has more names than any language I know of, of which

Banjari and Goar-boli are prominent. Lambani does not figure in the list of 22 scheduled languages in the Eighth schedule of the Constitution, but does so in the hundreds of "others" so lovingly and painstakingly documented in the People's Linguistic Survey of India by Dr. Ganesh Devy and his team.[1]

Lambani has approximately 4.2 million speakers. Lacking a script of its own, it is written in a variety of scripts according to the dialect specific to the region where the Lambadi people live – Devnagari, Kannada, Telugu. What could be better for a national language, than to be widely spoken with different dialects and to be written in different scripts?

The Lambadis are a multi-lingual people, as was evident in my patient's attempts to engage with me in Hindi and with my residents in Kannada. They have an eclectic choice of gods and saints too, ranging from Tirupati Balaji, Guru Nanak, and an 18th century saint, Sant Sevalal, born in Karnataka. They are related also to India's first internationalists, the Romani people. The connections which were suspected on the basis of commonality of language and culture have now been established by studies which show that genetic material in the Y-chromosomes and in the mitochondria of Romani people bear imprints unique to South Asian ancestry.[2] Our patient could just as well have been a Roma woman lying in an ICU in Romania.

Closer home, she reminded me of the Rabari women of Gujarat whom I remember for their striking dresses with the mirror work and embroidery, their jewellery, and their carefree attitude. Lambadi women are skilled at embroidery too, with a distinctive style which uses mirrors and shells.

In these days of assimilation, the dressing styles are changing and her daughter, who was waiting outside, could have been mistaken for any other Kannada woman in a sari. The traditional dresses have probably gone out of vogue for this family (to be brought out for special occasions), the jewellery too, and gone for ever is their nomadic existence.

Dr. Ganesh Devy speaks of how "when a language dies something irreplaceable dies." [3] For the Banjaras and Lambadis, I hope that what shall probably last is their language, named after the flavour that they brought to the kitchens of India (Lavanya in Sanskrit means salt), and the memories of the colours and flavour that their communities brought to the culture of India.

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