

OPINION



From the readers

Bhutan has more than three gems

Sir, Bhutan has more than three gems. Each human language on our planet is a treasure trove of concepts, sentiments and sensibilities. Bhutan has nineteen such treasure troves. The Dzongkha Development Authority (formerly Commission) has for years worked productively to advance the cause of the national language. At the same time the Research Division of the DDA has devoted time and energy to the documentation of the endangered languages of the kingdom in order to preserve for posterity the original diversity of Bhutan's native linguistic heritage.

Thanks to the work of the DDA, future generations of Bhutanese will have a far better command of Dzongkha than generations past. Yet any language of Bhutan that dies is gone forever. The three rarest linguistic gems of the kingdom are the languages Gongduk, Black Mountain and Lhokpu. Gongduk is spoken in a beautiful enclave in Mongar District. The Black Mountain language is spoken by Monpa who live in seven small and widely scattered villages deep within the Black Mountains. The Lhokpu language is the tongue of the cheerful Lhop or Doya people in the hills of Samtse District. Poignantly, these three nearly muted tongues have the most to tell us about our past.

Just as Dzongkha is the national language of Bhutan, English likewise occupies an unassailable position in Great

Britain as well as in several other countries. So we often forget that, historically speaking, English is a newcomer to the British Isles. In the 4th century no language or dialect ancestral to English was spoken anywhere in Great Britain. Even today languages like Gaelic, Cornish, Manx, Welsh and Irish still bear testimony to an earlier layer of population history before the arrival of the Angles and the Saxons on British shores in the mid 5th century.

An early form of Dzongkha appears to have entered Bhutan at about the same time that Old English entered the British Isles. Some of Bhutan's other languages were already spoken in the country long before this time. The three gems are rare precisely because Gongduk, Black Mountain and Lhokpu are now spoken by a dwindling number of people who are already undergoing a process of linguistic assimilation to neighbouring groups. All three languages are in imminent danger of extinction. Gongduk is under siege by Tshangla (Sharchop). Black Mountain is threatened by Khengkha, whilst Lhokpu is endangered by the spread of Nepali.

It is difficult to explain why all of the languages of Bhutan are so special without delving into details of grammar and lexicon, the intricacies of historical sound laws and the structure of language family trees. But once the meticulous linguistic work has been done, the upshot or take-home message is a highly

interesting and engaging tale of Bhutan's prehistory that everyone can appreciate. The nation's prehistory belongs to everyone. The interesting and ever unfolding story of history has made us what we are today. Linguistics, population genetics and archaeology are three scientific disciplines that enable us to unravel the strands of our shared past.

The three grammar books to be published in a year by the DDA will not only include detailed grammatical and lexicographical studies of these three endangered languages, they will also tell a story of our past, the tale of ancient language relationships in Eurasia and the saga of great migrations of mankind in and around the greater Himalayan region in prehistorical times. The fascinating work of the DDA will not stop there. Alongside its dedicated mission to promote Dzongkha as our national language, the Research Division of the DDA will continue to work to document Bhutan's rich linguistic heritage and to preserve this wealth for the nation's posterity.

George van Driem
Dzongkha Development
Authority

Read on

Sir, The message for this year's National Reading Week has changed into "Learn to Read, Read to Learn". We would like to remind all teachers and students that the conduct of National