



Njaanga Neenga

A Guest post by Jerson Sebastian on Njaanga Neenga. This post was originally posted on the ELNI Facebook Page on September 9 2019.

UNESCO is celebrating 2019 as International Indigenous Languages Year, to commemorate this I wrote a Coastal Dialect Dictionary Book of Kollam fishermen.

Name of the book published: “Njaanga Neenga” which means We and You.

I (Jerson Sebastian) am an HR professional working in Saudi Arabia. I picked up the words of this dialect from conversations with my father and my mates in the local Thangassery beach in Kollam, Kerala. My father is a fisherman and during my childhood I used to help him after school hours. The words they used were not part of our language textbooks and I always found it quite intriguing. I started preparing this coastal dictionary as the first step to preserving it.

1. Geographical Area of the project: The coastal line of Kollam fishermen is 37 kilometers. Out of which for this project 'coastal dialect dictionary', data is collected from 12 kilometers long coastal line which comprises 10 coastal villages ranging between Thangassery to Thanni in Kollam.

2. Number of Fishermen Using This Language: As of 2015 census report as per Marine Fisheries Statistics 2015, there are 196393 marine fishermen.

3. About the book (Njaanga Neenga)

There is a group of 20,000 local fishermen who use an endangered language. Apart from the slang, the local fishermen including my father use an uncommon assortment of words for internal communication that usually leaves you puzzled. I compiled that special vocabulary into a book called “Njaanga Neenga”, which translates as “We” and “You” in English. The 102-page book, which I call ‘a local textbook to coastal culture’ introduces a total of 1,700 words spoken in the 10 ‘Coastal Areas’ in Kollam ranging from Thangassery to Thanni.

Currently only 10% of the second generation fishermen use these words. Others are slowly switching to chaste Malayalam and this local idiom that evolved over four centuries may not survive for long. The distinctive feature of the Thangassery coastal language is its strong foreign influence, and you will find many Dutch, Portuguese and even Spanish expressions in the book. *Escriba* is a Spanish word and here we use it for secretary and our evening prayer is called *vespera*. There are more than hundred such words that will sound strange, but they are part of our local culture.

In the book you will find a wide range of words connected to fishing and every coastal community in Kerala can contribute to further enrich it. If we let the language die, we will also lose a treasure of indigenous wisdom that is encoded in them. These experiences and expertise can't be expressed in formal Malayalam hence we need to preserve it for future generations. In Kerala we should have a ‘Sea Dictionary’ covering all the seashore villages and their lore. Recently, I came across ethnic groups who communicate through whistling in Turkey and beating drums in Ghana. If they all can be acknowledged as indigenous languages, Kerala's coastal dictionary should also make it to the list.

4. How I developed this dictionary:

I am working in Saudi Arabia in the HR department of Global Suhaimi Company in Dammam, Saudi Arabia. I used to call my dad and mom from Dammam on a daily basis and try to talk to them in the local fishermen's language. They replied in the same language. I didn't tell my parents initially that I am preparing a coastal dictionary. If I had told them, they words might not be genuine, it may have had come artificially from them, and that wouldn't suit the purpose. So I kept a note of all the words popping up in between our conversation. Secondly, I used to imagine that a fisherman is with me always while I am driving, when I am alone at my room. I used to talk to that fisherman imagining that he is with me. Then I kept a note of the words rising between our conversations. Thus I collected most of these words through casual conversation with my parents and from Introspection.

5. How it is helpful to the speech communities:

I analyzed that most of these words have started to vanish from our coastal community. So, I thought of preserving them before they disappear. It would be interesting to know for the next generation that these words were used by our ancestors. Also, at present only 10 % of the present local fishermen use these words. The local fishermen have a great amount of marine knowledge and they can only convey or communicate these marine knowledge in

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this local language. In order to understand their marine knowledge, if the researchers and scientists have this kind of dictionary, they can easily refer and get complete picture of these indigenous fisherman's marine knowledge.

Regards

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