

31/07/2019

Subject: Notification of award of project grant

Project title: The impact of boarding schools on intergenerational transmission of Indigenous languages in Arunachal Pradesh (India)

Granting agency: University of Sydney Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Research Incubator Program

Research period: December 22, 2018 - December 21, 2019

Grant amount: AUD5000

Chief Investigator: Dr. Mark W. Post (University of Sydney)

Partner Investigators: Asst. Prof. Zilpha Modi (Rajiv Gandhi University AITS), Dr. Yankee Modi (University of Sydney)

Research Assistants: Miss Oyek Tapak, Miss Ojeb Gao, Mr. Lopen Paduk

Project Description: The negative impact of boarding (residential) schools on intergenerational transmission of Indigenous languages in North America and Australia is well known, and forms part of a broader history of actual and attempted cultural coercion, linguistic, and indeed quite possibly genocide (Adams 1995, Crystal 2000: 85, Flood 2006: 233, among many others). In many if not in all such cases, children were forcibly removed from their parents and communities, prevented from speaking their languages in the boarding school grounds (and punished if they did so), and thus deprived of the childhood social context in which language acquisition normally takes place.

A similar state of affairs is now taking shape in Arunachal Pradesh, an ethno-linguistic diversity “hotspot” in the Northeast Indian Himalaya where more than 100 Indigenous languages are spoken. In Arunachal Pradesh, the overwhelming majority of parents with the economic means to do so are sending children as young as three years of age to boarding schools often run by religious missionary organizations. In these schools, children are removed from their parents and communities, prevented from speaking their languages in the boarding school grounds (and punished if they do so), and thus deprived of the childhood social context in which language acquisition normally takes place.

One major difference between these two cases surrounds the term “forcibly” - in Arunachal Pradesh, no parents are “forced” to send their children to a residential school. Instead, they feel “compelled” to, due to the poor quality of government-run education and the lack of investment and economic opportunity in their areas more generally. And yet the outcome - a strongly negative impact on intergenerational transmission of Indigenous languages - seems to be almost identical, and we believe it is one of the major factors leading to language endangerment in Arunachal Pradesh today.

This project will implement a sociolinguistic field study, led and conducted by Indigenous researchers, into the demographics, motivations and impact of boarding schools on intergenerational transmission of Indigenous languages in Arunachal Pradesh, focusing on four boarding school catchments in the central-east region. The project is expected to result in at least one journal article, at least one conference presentation, and an archival deposit of relevant data.



Dr. Mark W. Post