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# Is India throwing away its language resources?

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*An analysis of whether the expansion of English-medium education in India is baulking the evolution of Indian languages.*

## Note

This article presents an analysis without any of the paraphernalia of scientific packaging and documentation. There is a substantial scholarly literature on the topics raised, and some suggestions for further reading are included finally.

It was because we were taught in our own language that our minds quickened. Learning should as far as possible follow the process of eating. When the taste begins from the first bite, the stomach is awakened to its function before it is loaded, so that its digestive juices get full play. Nothing like this happens when the Bengali boy is taught in English, however. The first bite bids fair to wrench loose both rows of teeth - like an earthquake in the mouth! And by the time he discovers that the morsel is not of the genus stone, but a digestible bonbon, half his allotted span of life is over. While one is choking and spluttering over the spelling and grammar, the inside remains starved; and when at length the taste comes through, the appetite has vanished. If the whole mind is not functioning from the beginning, its full powers remain undeveloped to the end.

Rabindranath Tagore, **My reminiscences**, 1911

We have been observing the Indian language scene for many years, and recently spent two months in India analysing language policy. And we are worried.

Our goal in visiting India was to see what lessons there are from the Indian experience of managing multilingualism that Europe might learn from. In Europe we are experiencing dynamic

processes of integration in the west ("European" Union) and post-communist disintegration in the east. In both, language plays a central role. Some languages more than others, and probably English most of all. This is where the parallel with India is a close one. Our fear is that a headlong rush for English throughout Europe might be as myopic and culturally distorting as the current thrust for English in India.

Language policy has been a major issue in India for two centuries, of deep concern to British administrators, Indian nationalists, and politicians at all levels from the village to the Lokh Sabha. Language policy has a high profile when vital decisions are needed on the use of particular languages in education, government service, political movements, the judicial system, local administration, etc. Language policy involves decisions about national and regional identities, national unity (or disunity), resource allocation, the nature of cooperation (economic, political and cultural) and desirable partners locally, nationally and internationally, and investment in and utilization of India's immense wealth of languages. Differences of language have also been used as one factor in mobilizing inter-communal conflict.

Conflict mostly involves unequal access to power and material resources, and perceived threats to a group's cultural identity. Conflict is often labelled as "ethnic" or "linguistic", which is misleading shorthand for multi-faceted phenomena. Ethnic and linguistic co-existence and harmony have a much lower news value, despite or perhaps because of their prevalence. There is evidence that bilingualism can reduce conflict potential and enhance communication between different groups. Ajit Mohanty has shown that in Phulbani district, Orissa, where "riots" and killings between Kond "tribals" and "non-tribals" took place in recent years, they occurred only in monolingual areas and not in the bilingual ones.

Any official language policy in a democracy is a compromise. The roles assigned to Hindi and English in the Indian Constitution and the Three Language Formula are no exception. The compromise represents a concerted effort by a large number of parties to reach a maximum of consensus on a complex issue. This consensus has been a fragile one throughout this century, and still is. If political leadership is weak (and there appears to be a general feeling that this is the case in contemporary India), then it is unlikely that enlightened, informed decisions are being taken in the key area of language policy.

Some well-informed Indian scholars assert that there is no language policy in India. But this does not mean that policy is not being made, covertly as well as overtly. Parents are voting with their feet, or at least their children's feet, when choosing schools. Politicians go through the motions of supporting the regional languages and mother tongues, but starve state primary schools of the necessary funding. Their own children, of course, go to English-medium schools.

Language policy is being made through decisions on choice of language in education (English or a regional language medium or other mother tongues), in the media (local or imported programmes and languages), business and administration (local, 'regional', 'link' and 'international' languages; language requirements for different jobs, salary levels, etc), and in countless everyday encounters. Taken together, these individual and societal choices amount to a pattern in which some languages are increasingly used while others are marginalized, at local, regional and national levels.

Essentially, a language policy involves government decisions on how the hierarchy of languages in the country can best be managed to serve the needs of the entire population of the country. This is why language rights figure prominently in the Indian Constitution, which attempts to provide guarantees to speakers of a wide range of languages. Worldwide, the struggle for language rights is part of the effort to ensure respect for human rights. Worldwide, there is also,

alas, a pattern of the rights of minority language speakers being violated. India is no exception, witness the absence of tribal languages and many "minor" languages from school time-tables and teacher training.

Some languages are more equal than others then. Some are more powerful than others. And everyone, whatever their degree of formal education or their income, knows that English is the most powerful language, in India as in so many countries.

What ordinary people and politicians most probably do not know is that there is no reason why the learning of English needs to be at the expense of other languages. The Scandinavians and Dutch with a good command of English have not phased out their own languages or been educated through the medium of English. It is perfectly possible to organize education so that children develop high levels of competence in at least two languages, and a reasonable familiarity with a third and fourth. Bilingualism and multilingualism can be a source of great joy, increased intellectual development and creativity and cultural sensitivity, as a wealth of research evidence from many countries indicates (and as Mohanty demonstrates for India).

Many Indians who are 40 or over enjoy the benefits of such high level bi- or multilingualism. But their children are less likely to do so, because of the inequality of languages in all walks of life, and the way education is organized.

The consequence of current language policy is that many among the younger generations of Indians are being deprived of familiarity with their cultural heritage, and quite probably of an education that would enable them to contribute to the solution of Indian problems in the future. The children in schools which use Indian languages as media of instruction often suffer from much more severe constraints than do those in English-medium schools: lack of resources for facilities and materials, low teacher salaries, poorly trained teachers, etc. Many children are in submersion programmes in which their own languages are not used at all or are used initially but phased out after a few years and are accorded low status. Other languages replace the mother tongue, at least in cognitively demanding domains and written language functions. Many learn neither their own languages nor other languages to a high level, often with serious consequences for content learning.

The children in "English-medium" schooling often develop literacy skills in their mother tongues to only a very limited extent, if at all. The English language and a synthetic global/American culture are taking over, with the result that Indian languages are not going through the processes of change and differentiated use that many European languages, Japanese and Korean have gone through in recent decades. As Harold Macmillan said in a comparable situation, it is like selling off the family silver.

English is a ticket to upward social mobility. It is manifestly a ticket that most Indians are unable to purchase. English-speaking elites are therefore rapidly moving even further away from the masses than in any earlier generations. Present-day language policy thus represents a major threat to the coherence and unity of the nation. Indian cultural traditions and strengths, which are accessible through the rich diversity of Indian languages, are being neglected.

A different language policy has been recommended for many years by virtually all Indian scholars who have researched in the field of language policy. They have provided research evidence which documents that Gandhiji and Nehru were right in warning, continuously over a half century, against an excessive focus on English. But the voices of the early leaders, from Rabindranath Tagore onwards, and of contemporary scholars have fallen on deaf ears. An enlightened language policy that builds on the foundations of Indian languages and adds English for certain purposes would lead to a totally different outcome, educationally, socially and

politically.

We can exemplify why we are worried. We have met people from all parts of India whose family history reflects loss of the mother tongue in a short period of time. Grandparents are unable to communicate with their own grandchildren because of the shift to English that English-medium schooling, urbanisation and geographical mobility have facilitated. In this way the cultural resources and heritage of Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, and countless other languages are being lost. At the individual level, the loss of inter-generational communication and continuity is a personal tragedy. It is a consequence that most probably parents did not anticipate. They were trying to do the best for their children by sending them to the "best" school.

This change in linguistic habits in upwardly mobile middle class families may not apply throughout India, for instance in Gujerat and Maharashtra, but it appears to be a widespread trend. It may as yet apply to only a small proportion of the elite, but it is precisely these people who are trend-setters. Ordinary Indians are more likely to be influenced by what the materially successful do (promote English-medium education) than what they say (promote several languages). Presumably those responsible for education in India and language policy in general are unaware of what is happening. Or if they are aware, one can only conclude that they are not interested in maintaining and promoting the cultural heritage of India and are acting in conflict with the Indian Constitution.

India, which is known worldwide as a rich laboratory of functioning multilingualism, seems to be perpetuating the iniquities of colonialism. Economic "liberalisation" will intensify influences from the west, and increase dependence on a western language. The chorus of warnings from Indian experts over recent decades against obsession with English has been ignored, with a concomitant neglect of Indian languages.

We are aware that India is a highly complex society. The press is sophisticated, not least in English - but these "All-India" newspapers cannot be read by 95% of the population of all India. We are aware that there is a lively debate in books and many scientific journals about many social policy issues. One might expect that relevant scholarship in relation to the role of English in India should be a major concern of university Departments of English. Sadly, this is seldom the case. Such departments are currently debating the nature of their subject. But the bread and butter of these institutions is literature. The issue of how the study of literature, virtually all of foreign origin, can contribute to the solution of India's domestic problems, is barely addressed. With a few notable exceptions, language policy does not appear to interest them, either as a topic of social concern or as an object for scientific study.

Scholars concerned with language are located elsewhere in departments of linguistics. Here rival cliques owe allegiance to imported paradigms of obscure theoretical interest and little social accountability. Structurally there are only the most tenuous of links between departments of "English" and "Linguistics" and the education system or the policy framework within which they operate.

There are, of course, happily exceptions to these over-generalisations. There are brilliant individual scholars sprinkled over the country, but the overall picture is bleak. The Government of India Institutes in Hyderabad (for English and Foreign Languages) and Mysore (for Indian Languages) are concerned with many of the issues we have raised, but their impact on education policy and language policy seems to have been limited. They may have influenced policy-makers constructively, but the contours of policy remain unchanged.

Linguistic dominance is asserted in countless subtle ways. In terminology which glorifies one

language and its ascribed virtues and stigmatizes others. In resources being allocated unevenly. Through discreet pressure from foreign governments packaged as "aid". Through westernization pressures in the academic, political and commercial worlds. Through favourable attitudes to some languages and hostility to others. Through ignorance about how education and language policy could be organized so as to achieve greater social justice, and a better functioning economy and democracy.

We shall conclude with one small example of the innocuous-seeming but insidious ways in which the dominance of English is asserted. One might fairly expect a book with the title "Language use in industries" in multilingual India to deal with the use of several languages. In fact the book is about English and people's attitudes to it in public and private sector undertakings. So "Language" = "English", the English of power and upward social mobility. This is the alchemy of English, in Braj Kachru's memorable phrase, just as an "educated" person is often synonymous with someone educated through the medium of English.

The title in question may reflect the wish of a sales-minded publisher for a crisp general title. But irrespective of that, it falls into the pattern of how dominant languages are marketed and others made invisible. It is symptomatic of the current state of play in Indian language policy. In our view, change is more urgently needed now than at any time this century.

*Suggestions for further reading:*

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